

To: Cabinet
Date: 12 June 2024
Report of: Head of Law and Governance
Title of Report: Approval of the Oxfordshire Councils Charter

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To approve the Oxfordshire Councils Charter, a framework for better partnership working in Oxfordshire, including shared commitments and principles.
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working
Corporate Priority:	Well Run Council
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24

Recommendations: That Cabinet resolves to:
1. Approve the Oxfordshire Councils Charter.

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Oxfordshire Councils Charter

Introduction and background

1. Collaboratively councils in Oxfordshire have developed the Oxfordshire Councils Charter (“the Charter”) to improve the working relationship between the different levels of government in Oxfordshire. The Charter would apply to Oxford City Council, the other districts and Oxfordshire County Council as well as parish councils were it to be adopted by all. Oxfordshire has 235 parish councils, 15 town councils, and 68 parish meetings.
2. The content of the charter is purposely at a high-level, to enable all signatory parties to adopt the aims, principles and commitments within their own capacity, resource, and ways of working.
3. The charter has been developed by a multi-organisational working group of officers from Oxfordshire 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 represents 97% of Oxfordshire’s local councils. Oxfordshire chief executive officers and Council leaders have also provided oversight throughout this work.

4. A working group was organised by officers from each council, and from different departments within the Council. This enabled a wide range of knowledge to be shared across the county, and to ensure the document reflects the different views and working practices.

Drafting the Charter

5. In October 2023, a roundtable meeting was organised for the parish councils to provide their input for the document, where officers and cabinet members from the district councils discussed the objectives of the Charter, the shared principles, and commitments. Held at County Hall, it was attended by 100 people representing 88 local councils.
6. A six-week survey was launched following the roundtable to enable all local councils the opportunity to input into this work. There were 164 responses to the survey, representing 85 local councils.
7. The strategic aims of the Charter were aggregated to facilitate 'stronger partnership working between Oxfordshire councils and to 'enhance local democracy'. The performance of the Charter will be measured by these indicators.
8. The shared principles focus on the district councils' corporate policies and frameworks; mutual respect, relationship building, and transparency and accountability.
9. The shared commitments focus on communication, consultation and engagement, resources and local democracy for all tiers of local government.
10. It was decided that instead of a hierarchy and expectation from each level, each authority should share the responsibility to ensure all tiers are working collaboratively.

Consultation and Next Steps

11. The draft Charter was sent out for online consultation, between Wednesday, 3rd January to Sunday, 11th February, where parish, district, and Oxfordshire County Council councillors were invited to review and evaluate the draft document. An online consultation form, hosted by Oxfordshire County Council, was created and circulated to all councillors. Over the six weeks, 96 consultation responses were submitted, with an overall supportive response of the aims, principles, and commitments of the draft charter:
 - 78% responded that they think the aims meet the needs of Oxfordshire councils.
 - 87% responded that they think the principles are the right principles for the charter.
 - 91% responded that they think the commitments are the right commitments to include in the charter.
12. Following the consultation, the charter working group analysed the feedback on specific sections of the draft charter and identified areas for consideration and redrafting. The contents of the charter remain broadly the same, but elements were reworded to provide clarity, avoid duplication and to ensure that the document captures and communicates the intention of the charter.

Approval of the Charter

13. The Charter was approved by Oxfordshire County Council in May 2024; approval from all Oxfordshire district councils are expected to follow in June 2024.
14. The dates that the Charter will be considered by and approved by the various councils within Oxfordshire are seen below in the table below.

Authority	Date of Decision
Oxfordshire County Council	14 th May 2024
Cherwell District Council	10 th June 2024
West Oxfordshire District Council	12 th June 2024
Oxford City Council	12 th June 2024
South Oxfordshire District Council	27 th June 2024
Vale of White Horse District Council	28 th June 2024

15. Following approval by each authority's executive, all councils will be invited to be a signatory of the charter. This is scheduled to take place at the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils Annual General Meeting on Monday, 1st July 2024. The Leader of the Council, Councillor Susan Brown will sign the approved charter on behalf of Oxford City Council.
16. Parish councils across Oxfordshire will then be invited to approve the Charter at their next meeting.
17. The Charter is designed to be an evolving document to fit the needs of an ever-changing landscape for local authorities across Oxfordshire. Further updates to the document, including monitoring the performance and progress of the Charter are expected.

Financial implications

18. There are no financial implications, the Charter is a guideline document to ensure all forms of government in Oxfordshire work closer together.

Legal issues

19. There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

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Background Papers: None

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