



**Action by Oxfordshire councils
on the climate crisis.**



The Oxfordshire Climate Action Survey

Between January and July 2019 all six Oxfordshire councils made a 'declaration of climate emergency' (around 75% of UK councils have now done this). Two years on Oxford Friends of the Earth carried out a survey to see what action our local councils have taken since making these declarations. The survey questions, this report and other information are available here: www.oxfoe.co.uk/climatesurvey

The survey looked at:

- » **The councils' internal responses to the climate crisis**
- » **How the councils have tackled key issues - energy, transport, and biodiversity**
- » **How the councils are working with other stakeholders**

The survey covered all six councils and all responded fully to the survey:

- » **Oxfordshire County Council (OCC)**
- » **Oxford City Council (OxCityC)**
- » **Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC)**
- » **South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC)**
- » **Cherwell District Council (CDC)**
- » **West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC)**

This report uses information supplied by the councils to look at the progress that has been made. Our thanks go to the councils and especially to their climate officers for their help in this.

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Oxford Friends of the Earth is a voluntary group of people living in Oxfordshire working for positive change that makes a lasting difference to our environment. We welcome new members – find out more at www.oxfoe.co.uk



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Introduction

Most people recognise that we are facing a climate crisis – about 80% of the UK population say that they are concerned about climate change. Action is urgently needed to cut carbon emissions throughout the entire economy. Our local councils have important roles to play and 2019 saw calls across the UK for them to declare a state of 'climate emergency'. All six Oxfordshire councils did so. Their own 'carbon footprints' may be just a small fraction of total UK emissions but their influence on transport, housing and green spaces is critically important.

Two years on Oxford Friends of the Earth surveyed what our councils have done and produced this report. The results are mixed.

- » **We are encouraged by the fact that all our councils have climate plans or frameworks for action; they have dedicated staff at work on these issues, and there appears to be genuine commitment to act to save our future.**
- » **There are problems – new developments are being agreed with little consideration of how these fit with meeting ambitious climate targets.**
- » **Despite the Covid crisis, climate work has not been sidelined, and all councils have stated that their Covid recovery plans will link with their climate action work.**

But much more must be done. We need to see these plans turned into action to deliver real cuts in emissions in the immediate future – this year, next year and beyond. Covid has resulted in a UK fall in carbon emissions of 11%. If we are to limit climate change to 1.5C we need a similar cut every year for the

next decade. Our councils need to change how they are working, as well as implementing major changes throughout Oxfordshire. They need to put this work 'front and centre' if they are to succeed in reaching their reduction targets.

Our councils have two key roles to play: firstly in helping to ensure that there is no 'implementation gap' between national policy targets and local action. Secondly it is the case that 'local can lead' – meaning local innovation can inform action elsewhere, as well as helping to shape and drive national policy.

Our councils have limited resources. It is important that all actions are achieving maximum reductions. There is no time to be satisfied with minimal achievements. Councils can deliver the changes we need in four different ways, and each recommendation ties into these (see section B for more on this):

- 1. Councils getting their own house in order**
- 2. Councils setting clear planning and regulatory frameworks**
- 3. Councils as enablers of societal change**
- 4. Councils as advocates for change**

Our councils also need to work together. They all face similar pressures, and issues such as transport and pollution do not stop at council boundaries. Each council will have good ideas and activities but without collaboration councils will face gaps in what they can actually achieve. Given the resource limitations they face we feel that more collaboration is essential.

Summary: Making change happen - our calls for action

The results of the survey are assessed in section A below. Section B asks 'Are we getting there?', sets out our conclusions, and looks at the challenges facing local action. The recommendations in both sections are summarised here.

These recommendations are based on the responses to the survey, previous work on local policies, and on current national climate policy issues. These are for action by all Oxfordshire councils – the County, the City and the four Districts. **Some councils have already implemented some of these recommendations** – we welcome that and encourage them to share learning with others to maximise the benefits of action. While all the councils have set long term targets, **we strongly encourage all the councils to focus now on reducing emissions in the next four years.** The sooner that emissions start to fall rapidly, the lower the total emissions will be on the route to net zero, and the easier it will be to reach the 1.5C target.

We call on all Oxfordshire councils to work together to:

- » **Develop a county-wide route map to take us to 'net zero' before 2040 with year-on-year emission reduction targets. This should be fully integrated with the Oxfordshire 2050 plan that is currently under development.**
- » **Introduce suitable measures and indicators of progress towards net zero and to publish an annual report showing progress against these key performance indicators.** These should link district and city level responsibilities with county-level issues such as transport. Common targets across the councils will make joint action and sharing of good practice more feasible and effective.

We call on all our councils to:

1. **Ensure that updates of their Local Plans put the need to reach net zero at their core.**
2. **Develop and resource a Carbon Management Plan to reduce their carbon emissions from all activities and link this clearly to their Local Plan and Climate Action Plan.**
3. **Set a clear carbon budget (at departmental**

level) as has been done by other pace-setting councils, with the Cabinet monitoring progress as it does on financial targets.

4. **Ensure that all departments within the Council have designated staff with the skills and training to manage that section's part of the carbon budget.**
5. **Offer training on climate change and Council action plans to all staff where this may be relevant, and to all councillors. Some basic training on the council's plan and goals should be part of all induction processes.**
6. **Implement a cross-departmental system for climate impact reporting as soon as possible using common measures and indicators throughout all councils.**
7. **Review current spending plans in the light of their climate impact.**
8. **Consider how communication on climate action can be integrated with other engagement work and ensure that staff who deal with local communities feel confident to discuss this aspect of the councils' work.**
9. **Develop and implement procurement strategies and guidelines (targeted at reducing the climate impacts resulting from the purchasing of good and services) that include the delivery of council carbon targets as part of the 'best value' criteria.**
10. **Recognise that the transition to zero carbon must be fair and just and – with that in mind – carry out an equalities impact assessment (EIA) of their climate change plans.**

Energy use

We call on all our councils to:

11. **Cooperate to set a common zero carbon standard for new homes and other buildings, and to establish an 'Innovation Zone' across the county to link builders and developers with training providers and others in the supply chain.**

Summary: Making change happen - our calls for action

12. **Set up a County Emergency Retrofit Task Force to plan and deliver energy saving measures in homes and buildings across the county and to join those calling for a properly scaled and funded national programme.**
13. **Switch to sustainable electricity providers, and do this so that they support the development of additional renewable energy, rather than just the statistical transfer of renewable energy certificates.**
17. **Develop local Nature Recovery Strategies (in line with current national proposals) in collaboration with local conservation and environmental organisations and other stakeholders.**
18. **Support the proposal to double tree cover across the county by 2045 and to develop tree planting plans towards this goal.**

The need for national action

We will not achieve a zero carbon county on our own: the national government needs to make major policy changes on heating and energy, on transport, and on all the goods and services we use. Without sufficient national drivers and support systems, it remains likely that even the most motivated councils will fail to reach their goals.

Transport

14. **We call on the County Council to ensure that the proposed Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP) sets out a 'road map' for delivering a zero carbon transport system as the central priority. It must also show how it will make active travel, public and shared transport the 'Natural First Choice' (the words used in an LTCP draft document). The LTCP must be fully aligned with the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan and with the proposed county route map to net zero**
15. **We call on the councils that are planning authorities to ensure that new development is delivered in such a way as to make active travel, public and shared transport the 'Natural First Choice'.**
19. **We call on our councils to recognise their role as advocates for change. We ask them to support calls from civil society for a clear government plan that shows how they will enable (and fund) local councils to help deliver the UK climate change targets of cutting emissions by 78% by 2035 and to reach zero carbon emissions by 2050¹.**

Biodiversity

We call on all our councils to:

16. **Review how far planning committees are integrating the climate and nature commitments made by their councils into their decision-making processes and to develop stronger procedures to ensure that new construction developments are in line with these commitments.**

¹ Over 100 councils have signed the ADEPT call: <https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/news-events/climate-change-hub/show-your-support-five-immediate-priorities-green-recovery>

Section A: The survey results

1. Do we have a plan?

In 2019 the UK Government set a target that requires the UK to “bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050”. The UK was the first major economy in the world to pass a law to end its contribution to global warming by that date. There remain questions about what this means, but it sets a clear baseline target that every council should also be meeting. This will require major changes in every aspect of life and the economy, and delivering those changes will need careful planning.

The first question OxFoE asked in the survey was ***‘Is there a climate action plan?’***

All our councils have or are in the process of developing a plan. Three (OCC, CDC, WODC) have a climate plan approved and in place. Oxford City Council have their climate plan embedded in their Corporate Plan. VWHDC and SODC were still developing their plans at the time of the survey.

A plan on its own can show clearly what is to be done. WODC’s climate plan (<https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/tslaufqh/carbon-action-plan.pdf>) is a good example of a plan that sets out what the council will do and why. The alternative – having the climate work as part of a wider plan - may help ensure that this work is implemented alongside other priorities, but there is also the possibility that the urgency of action is lost.

It is equally important to understand where the Council is starting from and the level of their current greenhouse gas emissions. We therefore asked:

‘Has the Council ‘benchmarked’ existing carbon emissions from council activities?’

VWHDC and SODC have not yet done this – all the others have. OCC, OxCityC and CDC have been doing this for some years. It would be desirable for all councils to have this data and to make it clear and accessible.

The District and City Councils already have key documents that set out development strategies – their ‘Local Plans’. These set the framework and policies for all future work and we recommend that this should be a ‘route map’ to the declared goal of zero carbon. We asked has the council ***‘reviewed, or does it plan to review, the Local Plan to include policies to mitigate and adapt to climate change?’***

Four said yes, and the others intend to do so. The City Plan has already been reviewed (and others are due to be). At present most Local Plans make reference to climate change but lack anything like suitable policies to deliver the ambitious climate targets that have been set in declarations of climate emergency (see section 2). These Plans are regularly updated, so for most councils the next update will be critical to ensure that the future policies will be sufficient.

Vale have stated that *“Policies are to be included on protecting the environment and responding to climate change”,* while Cherwell DC state that *“the Climate Emergency will be one of three cross cutting core themes which will interweave throughout every element of the document”.*

We urge our councils to ensure that updates of their Local Plans put the need to reach net zero at the core of these documents.

Oxford FoE will encourage groups across the county to engage with these review processes and have produced a draft ‘Supplementary Planning Document’ (with a local planner) that sets out some appropriate policies².

2 <https://www.oxfoe.co.uk/oxford-friends-of-the-earth/local-development-issues/>

Section A: The survey results

2. Setting a date

The UK national target for reaching net zero is 2050 – a date that many scientists believe to be too late if we are to avoid the worst impacts of a warming world. But that is, for better or worse, a mark against which local performance can be assessed. In 2019 councils were being pushed to respond to the emergency and some targets may have been set more out of a desire to commit rather than being based on planned action.

All our councils have set a target date to reach net zero carbon from their own operations.

The target dates vary:

- » **Vale DC: June 30, 2030**
- » **South DC: June 30, 2025**
- » **Oxon CC: December 31, 2030**
- » **Cherwell DC: March 31, 2030**
- » **West Oxon DC: December 31, 2029**
- » **Oxford City: January 1, 2030**

These targets are all very ambitious. While we need and welcome that ambition we have real doubts about whether these goals can be met - especially for the SODC target which is just four years away. Given that Vale DC and SODC share the same offices and many staff there may be a need for some review here.

It is of course the case that the council's own operations only account for a small part of the total emissions so we also asked '**has the council set a target date to reach net zero carbon across the wider area?**'. All councils except WODC have set targets; again the dates vary widely:

- » **Vale DC: June 30, 2045**
- » **South DC: June 30, 2030**
- » **Oxon CC: December 30, 2050**
- » **Cherwell DC: March 31, 2030**
- » **West Oxford DC: No set target**
- » **Oxford City: January 1, 2040**

Again, some of these targets are extremely ambitious. Oxford Friends of the Earth has called for the UK to reach zero carbon 'by 2040': we have questions about the feasibility of a 2030 target. Reaching zero for this 'wider area' will need to cover transport, farming, large-scale retrofitting of homes, aviation and heavy industry. All this needs much more action and leadership from

the UK government and others. The sheer scale of change raises real questions as to whether this can be done in a way that would avoid real hardship for many.

We need ambition to drive progress, and challenging goals that we can work to 'meet and beat'. But a target that few believe to be achievable may undermine this work and set us up to fail.

These dates matter but they are less important than what happens in the next few years. The faster we start to make real cuts in emissions, the easier it will be to meet the goals. Every year of relative inaction makes the final goal harder to achieve. In order to reach these longer term goals, councils will need shorter term goals against which progress can be measured. We welcome - as first steps - current work by the City Council to produce a 'Zero Carbon Oxford' roadmap and action plan for 2040 (with five yearly targets) and the County's work on 'Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire'. We suggest that collaboration on this across all councils will enable faster action.

We call on all Oxfordshire councils to work together to:

- » **Develop a county-wide route map to take us to 'net zero' with year-on-year emission reduction targets. This should be fully integrated with the Oxfordshire 2050 plan that is currently under development.**
- » **Introduce suitable measures and indicators of progress towards net zero and to publish an annual report showing progress against these key measures.** These should link district and city level responsibilities with county-level issues such as transport. Common targets across the councils will make joint action and sharing of good practice more feasible and effective.

Section A: The survey results

3. Who's doing the work?

Making the necessary changes to meet climate ambitions will not be easy. It is therefore important that staff and councillors are fully committed and have the necessary support. We asked: **'Is there a Cabinet member responsible for climate action?'** All councils have this except for SODC, all have designated staff, and all state that councillors are regularly updated on the progress of work on the council's climate programme. The level of staffing varies: the City have a team, due partly to their success in bringing in external funding.

Engagement of councillors also varies: Vale and South DCs have Climate Emergency Action Committees and a team of three officers working on climate action. The County has a 'Cabinet Advisory Group on Climate Action' and Cherwell have an operational link with the County. WODC have a 'Cross-party Climate Action Working Group' while the City are more developed with staff in the Environmental Service Team, a Climate Emergency Scrutiny Review Group, and a Zero Carbon Steering Group. It is not entirely clear in some cases how decisions are reviewed through these processes.

A valuable feature of local councils is the 'scrutiny panel' (introduced in 2000) made up of councillors from all parties that can take an independent view of council activities, look at specific work areas in detail and make recommendations to the council leaders and cabinet.

We asked if the scrutiny panel had discussed climate activity?

Responses varied from a detailed scrutiny report in the City to future plans to do so in other councils. The City Council's scrutiny report in 2020 prompted a full response on future action by the City Cabinet in March 2021. We see the use of Scrutiny as a valuable way to check on progress.

We suggest that every council publishes an annual report showing progress against key measures and indicators of progress towards net zero.

'Doing the right thing' on the climate crisis is not always easy and some clear understanding of the key issues and of what the best current practice looks like will be important to support good decision-making.

Building skills across the organisation (and not just in the climate team) will be important.

We asked 'has there been any training for relevant staff on delivering climate action?'

The answers suggest that there is room for improvement. Only half the councils (City, County and Cherwell) have done this. This will be an important work area for councils for the foreseeable future, and one which they have recognised as an 'emergency'. It will be important for councillors and staff and not just staff directly focused on climate work.

We suggest that councils offer training packages on climate change and their current plans to all staff where this may be relevant, and to all councillors. Some basic training on the council's plan and goals should be part of all induction processes.

4. Funding for climate action

As change does not just happen, but rather requires resources, we asked: **'Is there a specific budget for climate action?'**

All councils said yes, which is a good step forward. However, the scale of these budgets vary widely. The smaller councils – the Districts - have limited climate budgets varying from £12,000 (Cherwell) to £200,000 (WODC). For some councils these budgets include the costs of staff, while others have a clear budget for projects and programmes on top of staff costs.

The County Council has 'a commissioning and feasibility budget directly associated with Climate Action' of £270,000 as well staff costs. Like other councils it also has programmes that support emissions reductions – in the case of the County these include the 'Active Travel Hub', and work on waste management, property and its transport fleet.

The budget of the City is of a different order of magnitude. The budget presented in February 2021 reveals that "in tackling the climate emergency: in total, over £17 million in new capital and £1 million in new revenue is proposed, covering areas ranging from local leadership, through to work with the County Council to reduce traffic congestion, to increased retrofitting of existing Council Housing stock, to electric vehicle charging, and a low carbon heating network." The

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February 2021 Budget acknowledged that there had been a high level of public concern about possible cuts to the climate budget in previous months.

The City Council have been successful in raising external funding for work on climate-related activity with various partners. One major example is Project LEO (Local Energy Oxfordshire), a major innovative programme that involves the City, the County, both Universities, the Low Carbon Hub and others. A total figure of around £90 million has been raised, although this budget is spread across the partners.

Given the varying approaches and situations for the different councils we would not seek to suggest that the climate budgets are directly comparable or a measure of success on their own. It will be more important to measure achievement in terms of progress towards the zero carbon targets – see section 2 above – and to consider all council expenditure.

5. It's not just the climate plan

Any council's climate impacts result from all their activities. Most of these are not the responsibility of the council's climate team. For that reason we asked: ***'Have departmental budgets and spending plans been reviewed in light of climate change?'***

There is work to be done here: Vale and SODC said there is an intention to do so and WODC have not done this. The County, the City and Cherwell have done so (we did not have the scope to go further into how this has been done).

We also asked: ***'Do council reports (especially those supporting executive decisions) routinely include a section about how a project or decision will help the council reach its climate action goals?'***

Again there is wide variation. Vale, SODC and the City said there is an intention to do so. The County and Cherwell do this for some reports, and WODC said it is done for all. If the Councils are taking the 'climate emergency' seriously then this must be introduced.

We ask that a cross-departmental system for climate impact reporting should be put in place as soon

as possible. This will require staff in the different departments to have the skills to do such reporting and relates to the training issue mentioned in section 3 above.

We also strongly recommend that every council reviews spending plans in the light of their climate commitment.

It is obviously vital that councils understand the climate impacts of all that they do. We welcome the various baseline reviews of council energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. We would look for these to lead to Carbon Management Plans (CMPs). Vale DC and SODC are developing a CMP on baseline council energy consumption and CO2 emissions. Leading UK consultancy Aether have produced a report on energy consumption across the Districts. This data collection is an important building block for future action.

The City Council has a CMP (CMP3 2017-2022) under which 5% per year reduction target has been set. 'CMP 3' covers emissions from their own estate and reductions in local emissions that they can control or influence. Emissions data is included in reports on council operations. This is an important first step in the quantification of emissions and identifying pathways of reduction but does not replace the necessity of developing a net-zero plan. The Council 'Asset Management Plan 2016-2020' has links to the CMP and other sustainability policies that should be the driver in carbon reductions in assets managed by the Council. This is a good example of embedding carbon reductions in wider Council activities. Following the installation of renewable energy systems on council buildings up to 10% of electricity used is generated 'on-site'.

We call on each council to develop and resource a Carbon Management Plan and to link this clearly to their Local Plan and Climate Action Plan. This should lead to setting a clear carbon budget (at departmental level) as has been done by other pace-setting councils³, with the Cabinet monitoring progress as it does on financial targets. Councils should ensure that all departments have designated staff with the skills and training to manage that section's part of the carbon budget.

3 (e.g. <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/environment/green-living/environmental-policy/>)

Section A: The survey results

A critical set of impacts come from how and where the council spends its money. We asked:

'Has there been any review of how council procurement processes can support cuts in climate impacts?'

All stated that 'There is an intention to do so'. The County and Cherwell added that they are working on 'a Social Value policy and monitoring tool to support integration of emissions reduction and wider sustainability issues into our purchasing decisions'. The City Council have since stated that their 'procurement process considers our key aim of zero carbon and the whole lifecycle from purchase to disposal is considered, and ensuring products purchased meet the latest minimum energy efficiency requirements'. We consider the lack of review of council procurement process a problematic issue.

We therefore call on all councils to develop and implement procurement strategies and guidelines (targeted at reducing the climate impacts resulting from their purchases of good and services) that show help with delivery of council carbon targets as part of the 'best value' criteria. Again, cooperation between councils to share best practices and to set comparable goals and standards would be useful.

6. The Big Issues

Energy use in buildings and transport are the major sources of greenhouse gas emissions across the county. Our councils can have a significant impact on reducing emissions from these sectors. Furthermore, besides the catastrophic effects of climate change, we currently also face an ecological crisis. We therefore also asked about the actions councils are taking to support nature conservation and protect and enhance biodiversity.

6.1. Energy use

We asked: ***'Is the council taking any action to encourage or enforce high levels of energy efficiency and sustainability in new buildings, ensure location is accessible by public transport, walking and cycling, and to ensure that they are***

resilient to climate impacts?'

Five of the councils said that they are doing this and the sixth (Cherwell) is planning to do so. The current regulatory framework is a combination of policy set by the City or Districts, the County Council and the National Planning Policy Framework and other legislation. While the survey was being done, the Government confirmed that local councils do have legislative powers to set standards for new homes above the national regulations.

Oxford Friends of the Earth has already called for all our councils **to cooperate to set a common standard for new homes, and to establish an 'Innovation Zone' across the county** to link builders and developers with training providers and others in the supply chain. There has been positive interest in this idea from the City and County – see the Oxfordshire Zero Carbon Homes Initiative.⁴

Given the huge housing pressure that the county faces over the next decade, it is encouraging to see statements of commitment. However, those statements must be turned into strong policy as soon as possible.

One positive example is the requirement for net-zero carbon development at the 'Salt Cross' 2,200 home garden village on the north side of Eynsham set out in the draft Area Action Plan (AAP)⁵. This Plan is now undergoing examination - challenges around the net-zero carbon policy will be an important test for council powers.

We also asked how the council is ***'working to reduce and decarbonise energy use'*** in the buildings they own and manage.

Half the councils said that they are switching their electricity supply contracts to REGO-backed green electricity – while others may be doing this. **We would strongly encourage all Councils to switch to sustainable electricity providers, and do this so that they support the development of additional renewable energy**, rather than just the statistical transfer of renewable energy certificates.

4 <https://www.oxfoe.co.uk/zero-carbon-homes/>

5 <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/jscctcl/salt-cross-aap-pre-submission-august-2020.pdf>

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We have mentioned above the City Council 'Carbon Management Plan' linked to the 'Asset Management Plan 2016-2020' as a valuable way forward. The County Council is reflecting upon its demand for buildings following changes in ways of working resulting from the Covid crisis. This may impact on energy use across their estate. They have made promising changes including promoting behavioural change to save energy as well as various energy efficiency improvements. This includes replacing lighting to energy efficient LED (and commencing a large-scale replacement programme of streetlights to LED).

They will be bringing forward a new property strategy with a strong emphasis on emissions reduction with enhanced design standards to guide its procurement of new build and extensions as well as supporting adaptations of existing buildings. They will be looking to develop more detailed service strategic plans as part of a road map to achieving the 2030 target.

We also asked: ***'How is the council working to reduce and decarbonise energy use in buildings and to adapt them for climate change impacts? (for buildings in general across the council's area)'***

Retrofit of existing buildings will be a vital part of countywide decarbonisation and this will help tackle existing problems of cold homes and 'energy poverty'.

The 2019 'Oxfordshire Energy Strategy' led by OxLEP (the Local Enterprise Partnership) aimed to reduce emissions and stimulate 'energy innovation'. It included the need to retrofit 4,000 homes in Oxfordshire every year until 2030 and recognised that we need a retrofit programme to bring all homes in the county up to a minimum standard of 'EPC band C' by 2035.

There are already initiatives such as the Better Homes, Better Health advice service to residents, supported by local councils. There is the Cosy Homes programme which offers a paid-for service of 'whole house' assessments and support for retrofit. Oxfordshire Green-tech, supported by local councils, is supporting local businesses to access assistance to take action on the climate emergency agenda.

However these initiatives are inadequate: this is an

issue for the whole of the UK. The Cosy Homes pilot phase report in April 2021⁶ shows that they have done just 25 retrofits to date. The programme provides useful learning but it is clear that to reach the county strategy target and to go beyond that to net zero we need a much more comprehensive approach.

All homes must be brought up to high energy-efficiency standards by rolling out an area-by-area retrofit and heat pump-installation programme, ending the misery of cold, expensive-to-heat homes. The direct powers of councils may be limited on this, but the councils' role as 'enablers' will be vitally important in this work.

Work should start with a focus on buildings with the worst energy performance. This is the most cost-efficient way of reducing energy consumption. Similarly, Councils must focus on areas with high levels of energy poverty, where retrofitting strategies can have good integration with other social policies in providing comfortable homes for all.

We call on all our councils to set up a County-wide Emergency Retrofit Task Force to plan and deliver energy saving measures in homes and buildings across the county and to join those bodies calling for a properly scaled and funded national programme.

6.2. Transport

Emissions from transport are the largest source of emissions across Oxfordshire. We asked:

'What actions is the council taking to reduce transport emissions (for the council's own vehicles and activities)?'

We also asked: ***'What actions are the council taking to enable citizens to minimise emissions?'***

All councils are taking action to address their own transport carbon emissions, but some did not have a detailed plan in place at the time of the questionnaire. Of those with policies, the gradual replacement of light vehicle fleets with EVs, at the end of their normal lifetime, is a common approach. County and Cherwell

Section A: The survey results

have agreed policies to be “electric by default” as fleet vehicles come up for renewal. One council still refers to numbers of ULEV or Ultra Low Emissions Vehicles (with less than 75g of CO₂/km from the tailpipe, not zero emissions). It is not clear from the rate of replacement in the Council policies whether these are in line with the respective Council Zero Carbon targets. Only one council has set the goal of being “majority EV” for cars by 2024, and vans by 2028. There has been encouraging county-wide cooperation on EV infrastructure.

The City is an active participant in the Energy Superhub project⁷ which will be the world’s first ‘transmission-connected electric vehicle (EV) network’, connecting directly to National Grid’s extra-high voltage system to power over 100 ultra-rapid chargers. Given the rapid growth of the EV market (with over 30,000 EVs sold in the first three months of 2021) infrastructure investment like this will be very important.

Three councils are already researching options for heavy vehicles. The City is trialling an electric refuse lorry and their vehicle fleet is “approaching” 25% ULEV (Ultra Low Emissions Vehicle – with less than 75g of CO₂/km from the tailpipe). One recognises in its Plan that the transition for heavy vehicles will be “hard” and lists as an option: “Any residual emissions that cannot be entirely removed, offset by 2030 through a mechanism endorsed within this Plan”.

For those District councils taking action, the most common actions are around EV charging infrastructure. One has started a bicycle repair scheme and is encouraging active travel. The City council is supporting reduction in residents’ transport emissions in several ways including the Access to Oxford strategy, Zero Emissions Zone and installation of EV charging points. There was no explicit mention of public transport in the responses.

Two councils mention in their responses that they support “an agile and home working policy” and offer incentives to staff to engage in active travel. The County’s ‘travel at work’ policy follows a travel hierarchy which promotes less carbon intensive forms of travel and they offer a staff ‘bike to work’ incentive scheme to

support more active travel.

Transport Planning

Oxfordshire Highways is responsible for wider transport policy, so although some initiatives are originating with the City and District councils, the lead is being taken by the County Council. **They are developing the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP), “setting out an ambition to create a zero-carbon transport network for Oxfordshire”** and have been consulting shortly on its ‘vision’, which talks of “supporting our climate action priorities and promoting active travel”.

The aspirations here are laudable, as they were in LTP4. But the delivery on previous plans has been very unsuccessful. Despite previous promises the evidence base analysis shows:

- » Total vehicle miles increased by 29% 1993-2019
- » Average speeds down 2% since 2015
- » Declining bus usage

The full plan is projected to be published for consultation later in 2021. The County Council are taking action to support a behavioural shift to active travel, with several walking and cycling measures and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods planned for delivery in 2021. ‘Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans’ (LCWIPs) have been produced for Oxford and Bicester. They are also supporting emissions reduction through “Connecting Oxford” and the Zero Emissions Zone, and they are leading the Park’n’Charge and Go Ultra Low initiatives which are helping Oxfordshire residents in their transition to electric vehicles.

It is the case that the LTCP will be the primary transport policy in the next few years – exactly the time when our councils – and the whole UK – need to be focusing on rapid moves to decarbonisation. Given the need to tackle transport emissions, **we call on the County Council to ensure that this Plan sets out the ‘road map’ for delivering a zero carbon transport system as the central priority.** It must also show how it will make active travel, public and shared transport the ‘Natural First Choice’ (the words used in the vision).

7 <https://energysuperhuboxford.org/>

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Given the need for improved rail services the LTCP will need to engage with the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study and related national programmes.

We call on the councils that are planning authorities to ensure that new development is delivered in such a way as to make active travel, public and shared transport the 'Natural First Choice'. Friends of the Earth have guidance that sets out 27 actions councils can take to reduce car use⁸:

6.3. Biodiversity and Nature

We asked: **'How is the council supporting biodiversity in the natural environment that it owns or has influence over?'** We also asked whether **'green space management policies been reviewed in the light of climate plans?'**

Councils are just one set of organisations with a role in managing biodiversity, but as regulatory bodies they do have a unique role. Local landowners and bodies such as the Environment Agency are in some cases developing innovative climate-focused approaches to land management. These include the development of natural flood management systems, measures to conserve soil carbon and significant tree planting to sequester carbon and deliver other natural capital benefits. But these positive moves are coming alongside widespread threats to our countryside from many proposed new developments.

The statutory role of the districts and the City as planning authorities means that they have a key responsibility in ensuring that new developments protect and improve local biodiversity. We question whether planning committees are fully integrating the climate commitments made by their councils into their decision-making processes.

We call on all our councils to review how far planning committees are integrating the climate and nature commitments made by their councils into their decision-making processes and to develop stronger procedures to ensure that new developments are in line with the commitments.

Five out of six of the councils support increasing tree

cover outside Oxford, although one of the five points out that tree planting is not always the best solution in terms of biodiversity. Two are still in the early stages and plan to develop biodiversity net gain or tree planting strategies. Two mentioned supporting or restarting Local Nature Partnerships (a government initiative first introduced in 2011).

Oxfordshire County Council manages community woodlands and road verge nature reserves for which it is responsible 'in ways which maintain or improve biodiversity'. It also supports projects to improve biodiversity and plays a role in developing strategic approaches to nature conservation across the county. It is working with others to understand the implications of, and how best to deliver, increased tree cover.

The City has appointed a new Biodiversity & Countryside Land Management Officer "to develop enhancement land management plans for Council owned sites". Their biodiversity plan covers the period 2015 – 2020, and so predates the climate emergency declaration, although a review was published in 2020.

Cherwell council seems to be taking a particularly active role in biodiversity work, for example "supporting partnerships and projects such as Wild Bicester and Wild Banbury". A motion in support of doubling tree cover was passed by this Council, which is actively involved in the Oxfordshire Woodland Mapping project.

The new Environment Bill currently before Parliament is likely to mandate councils to develop Nature Recovery Strategies. **We welcome this and call on our councils to develop Nature Recovery Strategies,** in collaboration with local conservation and environment organisations and other stakeholders.

We also call on all councils to support the proposal to double tree cover across the county by 2045 and to develop tree planting plans towards this goal.

Councils and offsetting

Councils with carbon management plans have considered or are considering using carbon offsetting to manage residual emissions. This may involve large-scale tree planting elsewhere. We encourage councils

8 <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/climate/pedals-not-petrol-how-local-authorities-can-reduce-car-use>

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that do plan to use offsetting to not become reliant on this methodology to achieve reduction targets and also plan to not need it in the longer term and certainly to phase this out before 2050. Relying on carbon offset mechanisms can lead to inaction in other areas.

Councils, waste and recycling

We did not cover waste issues in the survey. But we welcome the revitalised Oxfordshire Resources and Waste Partnership (ORWP) which brings together the City, District and County Councils to take action on resources and recycling between collection and disposal authorities in Oxfordshire. The ORWP will establish a shared agenda on this work between all Oxfordshire's local authorities. A similar body would be one way forward for development of the County Climate route map that we recommend.

7. Building engagement

Our councils cannot manage local climate work on their own. All parts of society will be affected and will need to be involved in order for a successful transition to net zero. This needs to be a fair and just process – there will be many changes and councils may need to take tough decisions which will affect communities in different ways. On some issues they will need support in doing the right thing, as the debate on low traffic neighbourhoods has shown.

But it will also be important to develop zero carbon policies which are inclusive of issues relating to poverty, exclusion, and public health. The Covid pandemic has demonstrated some of the inequalities in our society, so that we are moving on the transition to net zero with more awareness of the issue. This gives us the opportunity to make sure that inequality is not “designed-in” to the process. The development of these policies needs to be done with the active engagement of affected people. Thirty-four years ago the UN World Commission on Environment and Development stated that *“It is futile to attempt to deal with environmental problems without a broader perspective that encompasses the factors underlying poverty and inequality”*.

With this in mind it is disappointing but perhaps not surprising that all councils answered no when we asked if they had **‘subjected climate change plans to an equalities impact assessment (EIA) ?**. More

work is needed here. The City pointed out some ways forward: “international, intergenerational, and social economic equality impacts were exposed, debated at their Citizens Assembly and feature in scrutiny work and plans. EIAs accompany each cabinet report.”

We ask all our councils to recognise that the transition to zero carbon must be fair and just and with that in mind carry out an equalities impact assessment (EIA) of their climate change plans.

There are of course many stakeholders. We asked how **‘councils are working with others on climate issues?’** with options ranging from sharing information to joint activities. This could include cooperation with other councils, businesses, town and parish councils, climate and environment groups, local residents, and the Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP). There is plenty of ‘sharing information’ but often not much more. The City and Cherwell talked about ‘joint planning and activities’ with local businesses and with OxLEP and three of the councils talked about ‘joint activities’ with other councils. Despite the energy and enthusiasm of local climate groups only Cherwell have progressed as far as ‘joint planning’ with such groups.

If councils are to achieve net zero across their whole region then it will be essential to have more buy-in. Every council climate programme faces a broad spectrum of interest from the community. At one end are climate action groups enthusiastically seeking to influence plans and policies. But the other end is often invisible – residents that seem to have no desire to talk about climate issues. Polls show that more than 80% of the population are worried about climate change, but the voices of many in the community are rarely heard on these issues, and some evidence suggests that they feel shut out from discussions.

Councils already engage with their communities in many ways. **We urge councils to consider how dialogues on climate action can be integrated with other engagement work, and ensure that staff who deal with local communities feel confident to discuss this aspect of the councils’ work.**

8. Obstacles and constraints

We asked the councils what they see as the main obstacles and constraints in relation to its climate activities. We provided some possibilities in the

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questionnaire and asked them to choose three.

Not all councils chose three issues, but the overall conclusions were clear: **national policy issues** and **lack of government funding** for this work were significant obstacles as is **a lack of staff resources** in half the councils. Two councils also mentioned **the impact of the Covid crisis**. No councils suggested **lack of public support** was a problem, nor **'too much public pressure'** – a suggestion that was made to us before this report was started.

We consider the lack of funding as a major concern as the transition to net-zero requires large investments. The capital cost of building improvement and renewable energy installation was seen as the 'biggest hurdle' by one council and another stressed the need for multi-year funded programmes particularly around retrofit to give certainty to the supply chain and stakeholders.

The national policy issues are one key to success. At present the messages from central government are confused and poorly integrated. Despite clear statements in the National Planning Policy Framework 2019 (NPPF) that the "planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate" and that it should help to "shape places in ways that contribute to radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions" this is simply not happening.

Oxfordshire is facing huge development pressures with new housing projects being approved that offer nothing in the way of 'radical reductions' or significant biodiversity improvements. New proposals around the 'Oxford-Cambridge Arc' are likely to add to these pressures. Oxford University colleges are also major local landowners – in some cases their charitable status pushes them to look for maximum profits from land sales which work against innovation and zero-carbon housing plans.

We urge our councils to recognise their role as advocates for change. They should support calls from civil society for a clear national plan that shows how national government will enable (and fund) local councils to help deliver the UK climate

change target of cutting emissions by 78% by 2035 and reaching net zero soon after that⁹.

The Environment Bill and the 'Decarbonising Transport' plan will emerge from Westminster this year. These are likely to set further duties for councils: it will be essential that with those duties come the resources to enable effective delivery.

We also asked how the status of climate action within the council has changed during the current Covid crisis. All councils chose the answer that 'We are seeking to 'build back better' and linking our climate work to the Covid response'. It is early days on this and we will be watching this with interest.

9 Over 100 councils have signed the ADEPT call: <https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/news-events/climate-change-hub/show-your-support-five-immediate-priorities-green-recovery>

Section B: Are we getting there?

All Oxfordshire councils have made some valuable progress on tackling the climate crisis in the last two years. Our review of similar activity elsewhere suggests Oxfordshire councils are in many ways 'ahead of the curve'. This should not be a surprise: the local economy is in better shape than many; we have two large universities with centres of low / zero carbon expertise; science parks are home to innovative start-ups; and we have many active voluntary groups. With these resources we should be showing real leadership and setting the pace of change.

But at present the UK is not making the necessary emission cuts. Some councils are making significant year-on-year cuts in their own direct emissions, but levels across the county are a different matter. The Covid crisis has seen emissions fall by 11% across the UK in a year: to achieve zero carbon and keep temperature rises to 1.5°C we should be making cuts on this scale every year for the next decade (see below). There is also the real likelihood of an 'emissions rebound' as the economy recovers. The UK needs to make major structural changes if it is to meet its net-zero emissions target over the next 30 years or sooner.

The real question is simple: are we doing enough?

The answer is also simple: No, more action is needed. The Tyndall Centre, a key research centre at the University of Manchester, has set carbon budgets for all UK district and city councils¹⁰ based on each council making 'its 'fair' contribution towards the Paris Climate Change Agreement'

For Oxford City they recommend "cuts in emissions averaging a minimum of -12.5% per year", and for the districts the figures are 13%+. **These figures are a huge challenge and reductions on this scale will require strong national as well as local action.** Collaboration between local authorities will also be critical.

10 <https://carbonbudget.manchester.ac.uk/reports/>

Section B: Are we getting there?

Oxfordshire Councils – a summary overview (as of February 2021):

Oxfordshire County Council

Oxfordshire County Council has limited influence through planning because they are not the planning authority. Transport is in their remit and they are in the process of developing a new Local Transport and Connectivity Plan. There is the ambition to create a zero-carbon transport network for Oxfordshire – how the Plan develops this and how it is implemented will be a critical test. The County's Climate Action Framework is a good basis for further development.

Cherwell District Council

Cherwell's response was notable for their close working relationship with Oxfordshire County Council. We strongly welcome their intention to address the climate emergency as one of the cross-cutting core themes in their current Local Plan Review.

Oxford City Council

Oxford City Council have the most established record of the six councils in addressing the climate crisis. A zero carbon Oxford is one of the four key aims of the Council's strategy. They have been operating multi-year carbon management plans since 2008 with measurable success and aim to reduce their average annual 'absolute' emissions by around 10% every year until 2030. They have been successful in raising investment in low carbon schemes. Their budget for this work is multi-million and on a different scale to the other councils. They have demonstrated that a determined and measured approach to reducing emissions can achieve results. We also commend their significant engagement with their community through their Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change.

South Oxfordshire District Council

South Oxfordshire District Council has the most ambitious target for achieving net-zero for its own operations, but appears to be still near the beginning of this journey. They have taken proven steps to address this by baselining their emissions and developing a carbon management plan to achieve their goals.

Vale of White Horse District Council

Vale of White Horse District Council is at the beginning of its journey towards its net-zero commitment. The council is developing baseline data for its own operations and its district, which we welcome as a necessary first step. We encourage VWHDC to build on this with clear, staged plans such as a carbon management plan. VWHDC has added references in its Local Plan to the climate emergency but we would encourage them to turn this into much more specific policies woven through the plan that will deliver its targets.

West Oxfordshire District Council

West Oxfordshire District Council has a net-zero target for its own operations but not for the wider area. Despite the greater challenge of addressing area emissions we strongly encourage WODC to make specific area target for net-zero, in particular around major emissions sources such as heating and transport where UK government policy has had little impact so far, and where local leadership will be vital. WODC does have a clear carbon management plan in place. Their Salt Cross Garden Village Area Action Plan is an excellent example of weaving climate action and sustainability through plans and policy.

Next steps and future work

All our councils are now actively engaged on solving the climate crisis. They have set ambitious targets to achieve 'net zero carbon' in their own operations and all – except WODC – have set area-wide targets. They have developed frameworks and action plans. That action now needs to lead to real and sustained reductions in carbon emissions both within their own operations and respective jurisdiction.

We welcome the wider area net-zero targets and encourage WODC to join the other Oxfordshire councils in committing to a net-zero target for its wider area. However, it is not clear that any of the councils have clarified how they will achieve 'net zero'. SODC and Cherwell are both aiming for dates within the decade, a long way ahead of national targets, which are thus extremely ambitious.

- » **We strongly encourage all the councils to focus on achieving significant emission reduction over the next four years. The sooner that levels start to fall, the lower the total emissions on the route to net zero, and the easier it will be to reach the 1.5C target.**
- » **We call on all councils to develop a county-wide route map with year-on-year targets with clear measurable goals that link district and city level responsibilities with county-level issues such as transport. Common targets across the councils will make joint action and sharing of good practice more feasible and effective. We welcome moves by the City Council in this direction and urge all our councils to do this, and to cooperate to set common county-wide goals as appropriate.**

Real change, maximum impact.

We will not achieve a zero-carbon county on our own: the national government needs to make major policy changes on heating and energy, on transport, and on all the goods and services we use. Without sufficient national drivers and support systems, it remains likely that even the most motivated councils will fail to reach their goals.

Our councils have limited resources. With this in mind it is important that what they do has the maximum possible impact. All councils can deliver change and impact in four areas:

1. Councils getting their own house in order

Every council has a target for progressive cuts in emissions across their own estate and operations. Achieving these targets will build trust and support, encourage others to act, and show real leadership. It will need engagement and buy-in from all departments, which will need staff training to ensure people understand their roles.

2. Councils setting clear planning and regulatory frameworks

Through these instruments councils will likely have the most significant impact. Local Plans for spatial development are at the core of city and district council operations. These must be fully integrated with climate action plans and demonstrate how they can help deliver zero carbon. One example would be setting zero carbon targets for all new homes (see 6.1).

3. Councils as enablers of societal change

Change must happen throughout all societal levels. Councils can play a key role in bringing different sectors together and building engagement with smaller organisations including parish councils, community groups etc. The Zero Carbon Oxford partnership (with the largest employers) recently set up by the City Council is a good example. More engagement across all sectors of society should be a priority.

4. Councils as advocates for change

National policies need to be stronger to tackle the climate crisis. Councils committed to delivering net zero need to make their voices heard to ensure that new policies are as effective as possible to make local change. Councils should identify specific delivery obstacles and look for national government to remove those obstacles. This will include long term financial commitment on issues such as decarbonising heat.

Conclusion: Facing the Challenges

Councils tackling the climate crisis face a number of challenges that will need to be addressed not just by the Climate Team but by the Council as a whole. Meeting the long term targets will involve the 'meeting and beating' a series of challenges – see below.

» **The challenge of integration**

Our councils need to ensure that all policies, programmes and investment decisions – including Covid recovery plans – are aligned and coherent, both regarding the climate, as well as carbon budgets and roadmaps. It is essential that a whole system approach is taken, so that a solution to one problem does not cause an issue elsewhere – alignment and coherency between policies is key.

We need an ambitious integrated infrastructure development plan that complies with scientifically robust carbon budgets and supports nature recovery. The Oxfordshire 2050 Plan and documents such as a County Climate Route Map should provide the overarching policy guidance and a set of measures by which progress can be clearly assessed.

» **The challenge of changing times**

The Covid crisis has shown the vulnerability of many of our current systems. But it has also shown that government nationally and locally can make radical and rapid change when the motivation is there. The climate emergency may be slower-moving but is more complex to address and has the potential to cost more lives than the pandemic. Transformative change is needed. Post-Covid recovery plans and investment provide a unique opportunity to move in a new zero carbon direction, creating new jobs and opportunities. All council responses said that they would do this: we look forward to seeing the implementation.

» **The rural challenge**

Oxfordshire is still a very rural county and there are some serious inequalities of access to services leading to continued car dependence. We need to ensure that the change and innovation that comes with moves towards net zero also show how we can ensure that rural communities are not disproportionately affected.

» **The engagement challenge**

Getting to net zero will be a challenge for every community and organisation. Every council climate programme faces a broad spectrum of interest - at one end are climate action groups knocking on the door, seeking to influence plans and policies. But the other end is often invisible – residents that seem to have no desire to talk about climate issues. Polls show that more than 80% of the population are worried about climate change: if we are to have solutions that are supported by all, then councils and climate activists alike need to find better ways to engage with those who feel that this is still 'nothing to do with me'.

» **Climate Justice: the health and inequality challenge**

Oxfordshire faces profound inequalities on issues such as educational attainment and health. Changes that come with the move to a zero-carbon society could make matters better or worse. The challenge is to be clear that this move must be done in ways that create a fairer society. Climate policies must be assessed in terms of their social impacts, while at the same time health and social programmes must be playing their part in cutting emissions.