

An aerial photograph of a large white horse sculpture carved into a green field. The sculpture is the central focus, showing the head, neck, and front legs. The surrounding area is a vast, green landscape with some faint tracks or paths.

Interim Performance Report

Vale of White Horse District Council

Corporate Plan 2020-24

May 2021

How performance is measured

The council's activities are guided by our four-year Corporate Plan for 2020-2024, and by fulfilling our statutory responsibilities. Key performance indicators will be measured for the council via quarterly and annual corporate plan performance reports. The reports will be subjected to a review process by the council's senior management team, Climate Emergency Advisory Committee, Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet, and then published on the council's website. It should be noted that:

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

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

Corporate Plan 2020-24

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

- Providing the homes people need
- Tackling the Climate Emergency
- Building healthy communities
- Building stable finances
- Working in partnership
- Working in an open and inclusive way

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

Feedback from residents and partners was that the council needed to focus on new priorities such as tackling climate change, building healthy communities and working in an open and inclusive way.

Although work is underway on these new themes, we are continuing to explore how best we can effectively invest, resource and deliver these. During the development of

the Plan, there was much uncertainty about the future of local government, both in terms of its structure and its financing. This uncertainty remains, and we are working to position ourselves to respond to the changing landscape we operate within. This has meant we have had to prioritise what we want to deliver. Some of the corporate plan projects have now been included in our budget for the year ahead, whilst others require more detailed scoping and consideration.

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

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

COVID-19 – Community Hub and roadmap

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

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

As well as dedicating significant officer resource to the pandemic, the council has also made its buildings available, including for the creation and operation of the community hub. The Beacon in Wantage from February 2021 is being used as a Covid-19 testing site for public-facing workers and volunteers who are not displaying symptoms. We have worked closely with partners across Oxfordshire to help set up this rapid symptom-free testing site to help stop the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and vital social care services, and ultimately to save lives.

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

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

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

We have also visited 268 people across South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse who the NHS test and trace national system has been unable to reach. The employment of two Government funded COVID-19 Compliance Marshals has enabled us to encourage and support businesses to trade in a 'COVID-19 secure' manner, and to provide further advice to the public. So far, **£28.2 million** has been paid in financial support to businesses in Vale of White Horse, through a range of HM Government grant schemes.

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

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

Theme 1 Providing the homes people need

Our challenge is to find ways to provide more genuinely affordable housing, including housing for social rent, to better provide for the needs of the Vale residents, we aim to provide a mix of tenures in each development to build sustainable homes in balanced and sustainable communities and use our influence on decision makers, where the responsibility lies outside of Vale.

The Vale of White Horse District's Local Plan is divided into two parts: Local Plan 2031 Part 1 was adopted at Full Council in December 2016; and Local Plan 2031 Part 2 was adopted by Full Council on Wednesday 9 October 2019.

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

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

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

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

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

After the first two years we have seen good progress towards the targets in all parts of the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal, though the COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on growth and development which prompted a review of all areas of activity. It is still anticipated that the Oxford to Cambridge Arc will be a major government focus for economic recovery.

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

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

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

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

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

In our Corporate Plan 2020-24 we set out to explore a council-owned holding company or vehicle, to focus on delivering a wide range of regeneration and community benefits including housing, community facilities, land maintenance and health. We have made good progress and have undertaken an appraisal of options that sets out the specific levers and characteristics that may be available to us to do this.

Theme 2 Tackling the Climate Emergency

The council is proud of its record on waste and recycling. We have achieved efficiencies in our contract and maintained consistently high levels of recycling and customer satisfaction with the service provided.

In February 2019 the council declared a Climate Emergency which was followed by a pledge to become a carbon neutral council by 2030 and a carbon neutral district by 2045. A Climate Action Plan for 2021-24 has been developed and an annual climate action work programme approved. We have completed baseline reviews and scenario modelling to enable the development of a robust climate action plan.

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

Vale of White Horse CO ₂ emissions (tonnes) Quarter 1 to Quarter 3				
	2019/20	2020/21	Change on 2019/20	% change on 2019/20
Leisure Centres	1,125	450	-675	-60.00%
Council Offices	67	50	-17	-25.37%
Beacon	45	28	-17	-37.78%
Staff Mileage	24	11	-13	-54.17%

The leisure centre reductions can be attributed exclusively to closures due to COVID-19 related closures and restricted access. We know that sustained reductions will only be achieved through the implementation of decarbonisation projects. We have made great progress on this and have been successful in obtaining £361k of external funding from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme for installation of low carbon and renewable energy at Faringdon Leisure Centre. The project will involve the full refurbishment of the heating system on both the wet and dry sides of the leisure centre, with the replacement of the gas boilers with air source heat pumps, together with solar panels to generate renewable electricity on site to power the new heat pumps. The project will deliver annual energy savings of 450,000 kwh - which is the equivalent of powering around 120 houses!

We will continue to explore further opportunities to secure external funding to further reduce our building emissions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recycling rates are high, and we have been in the top five of all English councils for recycling for several years. During 2019/20 (the latest year for which DEFRA figures are available), we achieved a recycling rate of 63.3% per cent, which was third highest of all English councils; 62.5% was achieved in 2018/19.

New website content on climate action has been launched to promote and raise awareness of the Climate Emergency and provide advice and support to residents and businesses. We have amended our decision-making templates to include climate and ecological implications to embed the Climate Emergency at the heart of our decision-making. This year's Town & Parish Council Forum is titled 'Climate Action – how can we take action together' and will discuss how to work together on making the district carbon neutral by 2045.

The Council are working with the operators of Milton Park (MEPC) to respond to the Climate Emergency and create healthy communities by bringing more sustainable investment, creating 10,000 new high value science and technology jobs. The review of the Milton Park Local Development Order, is part of our Science Vale strategy to provide an attractive environment for start-up businesses to grow and businesses to relocate -helping to create new jobs in science and technology, and other sectors. The Council supported by MEPC will carry out a public consultation later this year on the proposed modifications before they are considered by the council.

Theme 3 Building Healthy Communities

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, our COVID -19 response has been integral to supporting businesses and communities in the district. The Community Hub has

supported hundreds of residents across the district whilst also encouraging patients who have been invited for a vaccine and not accepted the offer. So far, a total of **£28.2 million** has been paid in financial support to businesses in the Vale of White Horse, through a range of HM Government grant schemes. The work on the Oxfordshire and local Economic Recovery Plan will provide an economic route map for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

A part of our Covid-19 response - we supported a number of community groups (a network) and will be exploring how to develop this further. Work is also underway to further adapt the council's Community Enablement function to respond to changing needs because of Covid-19 and a new framework, responding to changes in needs arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Work has commenced on the concept of healthy place-shaping to create sustainable well-designed communities where healthy behaviours are the norm. We will develop a collaborative policy and influencing framework to wrap around and support local areas and continue to attend the Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board and Oxfordshire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ensure the council aligns and contributes to health and wellbeing in its broader sense.

The Science Vale Cycle Network (SVCN) has received a £5.8 million investment, with construction now taking place to improve the routes. Five cycle routes are now complete and more than 10km of cycle and pedestrian paths are now open. These routes link all the key employment zones including Harwell Campus, Milton Park and Culham Science Centre with Abingdon, Wantage and Didcot, inclusive of Didcot Parkway. The second phase of the SVCN will be advanced in the upcoming year, as well as pushing forward a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) for Didcot. Our Didcot Garden Team have implemented a range of other projects including an arts and culture map trail project, a Pop-Up spaces project and the introduction of Street Tag - a fun, free smartphone app that offers rewards for exercise. Through our Active Communities Team, we offered out-reach to promote activity across the district, for example organising health walks, when COVID-19 restrictions have allowed.

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

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

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

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

As part of our commitments to help the districts become carbon neutral, we have struck up a new partnership to help local businesses reduce their carbon footprint. We're aiming for an ambitious net-zero target in Vale of White Horse and our businesses have an important role to play in achieving this goal. As strategic partners, the council will be working with Oxfordshire Greentech to help connect businesses with specialist suppliers, customers and support organisations, and access funding streams and networking opportunities to help them minimise their emissions and impact on the environment. The councils' South and Vale Business Support team will be partnering with the countywide network organisation to host events to show businesses how they can recycle more and reduce waste, how to incorporate sustainable procurement in their processes and to build in sustainability training.

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

Theme 4 Building Stable Finances

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

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

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

In recent years the level of council tax has been kept low, from £123 for a band 'D' property in 2011/12 to £141.69 for 2021/22. This is the fifteenth lowest of all shire district councils.

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

- Planning income totalled £1.16 million against a budget of £1.83 million, this compared to income of £1.27 million in 2019/20.
- Land charges income totalled £245k compared to £223k in the previous year.
- Car parking income totalled £241k compared to £476k in the previous year.
- The New Homes Bonus paid to the council for 2021/22 will be £4.56 million, compared to an average of £1.11 million, putting us first out of all 181 current shire district councils

- Our Council Tax collection rate of 98.27 per cent put us joint 60th with one other council when ranked against all 188 shire district councils existing at end March 2020 (the latest data available).

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

The council's new corporate focus on securing external funding will be implemented through the further development of our External Funding Framework. This framework builds on our recent success by securing funding as part of HM Government Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.

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

We are developing a new Procurement Strategy which will provide additional opportunities for savings and efficiencies and continue to lobby for a fairer distribution of government funding and more devolution of funding to councils to sustain essential local services.

Theme 5 Working in partnership

We continue to nurture existing local partnerships and develop new connections with people, groups and businesses across the Vale. Our COVID-19 community response has further fostered links with a range of organisations such as charities and community groups for support and NHS partners to facilitate the roll out of COVID-19 vaccinations across Oxfordshire. We want to harness these opportunities and build longer lasting partnerships, now we have demonstrated what we can do when we come together as a collective.

We are actively engaged in countywide and Arc-wide plans including economic recovery plans to maximise understanding of the local impact of COVID-19 and to help shape the support available to our local economy. We have just agreed a joint strategic vision for long term sustainable development across the County with all Oxfordshire local authorities. This sets out what the future growth in Oxfordshire should look like based on improving social, environmental and economic wellbeing for all.

We will engage with residents as this plan progresses to ensure our work remains rooted in the communities we serve. The future development of an enhanced consultations strategy and process to ensure we respond to consultations and proactively lobby national government and other bodies on matters that impact our corporate priorities, will support our work. This will be further enhanced by the development of a Partnership Protocol, mapping out our current local, regional and national partnerships to ensure the Vale has an active presence and appropriate resources.

Theme 6 Working in an open and inclusive way

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

We have completely rebuilt and relaunched our websites to make them easier to use for everyone, including those who are new to interacting with the councils online and those who have accessibility challenges, like visual impairments. We have used direct and effective communications tools to keep all of our communities, staff, councillors, partner organisations and volunteer groups well-informed on a daily basis during the height of the pandemic. We used highly engaging digital communications to get across complex messages to both inform, educate and reassure the general public and other customers about the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Council has also introduced external consultation tracking mechanisms earlier this year as a part of our aim to give greater strategic oversight and make sure we are having as much influence as we can. The council responds to consultations on proposed changes in policy and operations from a number of different sources. Adding increased co-ordination and tracking to this work will ensure the council can best make their voice heard, whether we can strengthen our voice by exploring joint submissions or working more closely with the Local Government Association and District Council Network where they are preparing a submission and help us to decide whether there is adequate value in responding to some consultations at all.

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

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

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