

COUNCILLORS' ANNUAL SUMMARY OF WODC ACTIVITY .



The year started with the election of a third of the seats at WODC.

The BBC headline summed up the situation:

[Tories lose control of West Oxfordshire Council in local election results 2022 - BBC News](#)

There were gains for the Lib Dems, Labour and Greens and the Tories stopped being a majority.

The makeup of the council is

- Conservative 20
- Liberal Democrats 15
- Labour/Labour and Co-operative 9
- Independent 3
- Green Party 2

Andy Graham, who leads the Lib Dem group, put together an alliance of Lib Dems, Labour and Greens. The Cabinet reflects the make up of the parties, with LD leadership, Labour deputy-leader and the 9 members being 5 LD, 3 Labour and 1 Green. This alliance has worked incredibly closely and well together, under LD leadership, throughout the year. Carl Rylett sits as Cabinet member for Planning & Sustainable Development and Dan Levy as Cabinet member for finance.

A key initial task was to put in place a set of objectives which would make a real difference to residents and inform everything that we did. It also would demonstrate how different we would be compared with the previous, do-as-little-as-possible administration.

1. Putting Residents First
2. Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All
3. Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife
4. Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency
5. Working Together for West Oxfordshire

We went out to consult with residents to get feedback on these objectives. In turn they have led into a Council Plan, also consulted on, which gives a more detailed description of what we want to achieve and the principles which will guide the administration.

So what have we done to date:

Openness.

We are genuinely committed to consultation and openness with residents. We have introduced a new consultation methodology and platform. It has had tremendous effects on increasing the number and scope of residents' responses to us, on areas including the budget.

We have restored the WODC magazine, WODC Voice, to "report back to residents on your council". We have had regular "Facebook live" sessions with residents asking the cabinet questions. The Cabinet has gone on tour, with meetings held in Charlbury, Chipping Norton and Woodstock, with Carterton and Eynsham imminent. Those meetings have given an opportunity for resident to make comments and ask questions of cabinet members, and have been very challenging for the cabinet, as is entirely proper.



Cabinet in Charlbury

There have been summits of parish and town councils and business groups to discuss what they want in the council plan and local plan, and meetings for parish and town councils to discuss specific issues of ecology, water and solar farm development.

WODC is finally introducing streaming of meetings, which will bring it in line with nearly all other councils, including many of the local parishes. This is long overdue, but was blocked by the last administration. WODC belongs to residents, and residents should be able to see what we do and challenge us if they think we can do better.

Addressing climate change.

We have put addressing climate change at the heart of what we do. That means that every decision has to be assessed to see if we can use it to reduce our carbon footprint. We have bought new electric roadsweepers and begun the process of converting our leisure centres away from gas heating. We are in the process of putting solar panels on the property we own, and have been pressing government to allow us to insist on new developments being carbon neutral.

Changes to the planning application process in West Oxfordshire mean applications must now better consider the environment while at the same time the process should be more user friendly.

New requirements mean applications will have to consider the impact they are having on local biodiversity. Aspects such as sewage disposal and air quality will also now need to be assessed. This aims to bring the process in line with the council's commitment to tackling the climate emergency."

For your information, it's covered here:

See <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23335037.west-oxfordshire-introduces-changes-planning-application-process/>

Cost of Living Crisis

Residents have faced real issues, particularly because of the massive increase in energy bills. WODC has put together an emergency committee, which has worked to distribute funds where it can, and has supported foodbanks and warm spaces. We created a fund, largely from money previously received to manage the COVID response, which has been used for cost of living support. And we increased the support we give to people who have legitimate reasons to struggle with their council tax bills. There are areas of deprivation in our towns and villages that are not always visible, and we are committed to supporting residents.

Agile working

We are changing the way the council operates, to increase efficiency, save money, improve working conditions for employees and improve the accessibility of WODC services to residents and businesses. As well as reshaping the committee rooms and council chamber to permit streaming of meetings, we are reducing the number of buildings we use, reflecting the ability of staff to work from home. There will be a new reception to greet residents, better facilities for people who want

to rent meeting rooms and register births, deaths and marriages. We are moving out of the Elmfield building, and this will be rented out to generate money that can be used for residents' services. The town shop of Welch Way has been refurbished, and is now the main place where residents can access our services and advice on areas such as council tax.

Budget

The new administration passed its first budget in February. It has been faced with a combination of very high inflation, demand on services including support for people facing the cost of living crisis, and limited support from central government. We took the decision to focus on key objectives, which includes our commitments to tackling climate change, and we have ensured that staff who had been on short term contracts doing crucial jobs have been included in our longterm commitments. We have employed staff to take over roles previously handled by external agencies, which will save money. The budget uses only £350k of the £12.9m reserves of the council.

Like all local authorities, we are dependent on future government grants for a high proportion of our income, and have worked on the basis that this may reduce but not disappear in the future.

One of our major successes was the acquisition of the Marriots Walk commercial centre in Witney. This was made available by its previous owners soon after the administration took office. The administration is committed to supporting thriving town and village centres, and this is an opportunity to ensure that Witney thrives. The price paid works to generate a surplus for the authority even if there are a number of empty premises, and this rental surplus will support our services to residents.

Local Plan

A key task is to develop a new Local Plan, to replace the existing one. This will cement our commitment to having developments only where there is infrastructure to support them, and for the development of thriving communities with schools, shops, sports and other amenities at the heart of walkable spaces. It is an opportunity to set down planning policies that cover all the things that can be foreseen in the next 30 years, so that, for instance, we can be more proscriptive about all developments being carbon neutral (or better) and to protect agricultural land.

The plan will be developed over the next 18 months, including periods of intense consultation.

Water and Sewage

As all residents know, there is a real issue in West Oxfordshire with sewage discharges and inadequate treatment works. The council has been relentless in pressing Thames Water to deliver better, and as part of this journey has held a successful water day, had numerous meetings with TW officers and with local campaigners, and made huge progress in getting TW to provide data on treatment work undercapacity, and to agree that in all planning applications there should be a condition that the sewage treatment works must be up to capacity prior to any houses being occupied. This is a big step on a long journey.

Eynsham, Cassington and South Leigh.



The major housing developments in West Eynsham and Salt Cross continue to be delayed. In the case of Salt Cross, we still await the Planning Inspector's response to the comments on his original report on the Area Action Plan, and in particular on his unwelcome refusal to allow WODC to insist on zero-carbon operation of the site.

It is the role of the council to try to make the developments as good for current and future residents as we can, given that they are certain to go ahead.

Other key issues include the planned "Botley West" solar farm. This will be determined by central government, and WODC will produce an impact study as part of the evidence to the inspectorate. This requires cabinet members to maintain impartiality, though "backbench" councillors, including Andy Goodwin, as well as residents and parish councils can of course campaign to protect our fields.

We have been particularly exercised this year by Thames Water issues, and have intervened with regards to spills in Eynsham, South Leigh and Cassington, as well as South Leigh Treatment Works being out of action for much of the year and a failure to get fresh water to new houses in Eynsham.

The three councillors can be contacted at any time with requests and comments, and help with issues big and small.

There is an election on May 4th for the seat currently held by Dan Levy. Please remember that the government introduced legislation to require voters to have photo ID for voting in person. If you don't have a passport or driving licence or another form of ID approved by the government, contact WODC to get a voter certificate. Alternatively, postal voting does not require photo ID. Much more detail on the WODC website: [Voter ID - what you need to do for the May 2023 elections - West Oxfordshire District Council \(westoxon.gov.uk\)](https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/voter-id-what-you-need-to-do-for-the-may-2023-elections)

Summary

Changing the control of the council was a big step, after 22 years of a single party control. There are a lot of areas which need improvement, and we have made a strong start. We have made it clear

that we will be responsible with money, but that our objectives are more ambitious than that, and will be driven by openness, ecology and improving the lives of residents.