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# CITY CHAMPIONS

How the city council is ensuring Oxford's long history of success continues



*Ensuring a city as complex and globally significant as Oxford grows sustainably is no easy task. But its award-winning city council is proving local knowledge and a long-term commitment can deliver impressive results*

# Playing to your strengths

Successful cities never stand still. Despite being home to one of the best universities in the world, having a booming economy and attracting seven million visitors a year, Oxford constantly has an eye on the future. The city is growing. It currently has £4bn of development projects in the pipeline that will deliver 22,000 jobs and around 7,000 much-needed new homes.

These are statistics of a magnitude you'd expect to find in a London borough. Even with its international profile, the economic clout of Oxford tends to surprise people. Perhaps what makes the scale of activity even more of an eye-opener is the fact that it's being shaped and guided not by a unitary authority but a district council.

In a time of unprecedented local government cutbacks, Oxford City Council has retained a focus on its key goal of creating a sustainable city in every sense of the word. That includes an extensive programme of climate change mitigation that's seen Oxford establish the only Low Emission Zone outside London and investment in renewable energy for council buildings. But in a city where a quarter of under-16s live below the poverty line, it's also about spreading the benefits of Oxford's economic and cultural boom.

'This is a small but vibrant and culturally diverse city with both affluent and quite deprived areas,' says leader Cllr Bob Price. 'One of our big focuses has been to use our partnerships to link the various cultural institutions in the city with schools and communities and open them up to a wider demographic.'

'This has always been a very engaged council and that's important to our work around community integration. Local councillors are very much part of their communities and that creates a deep level of understanding of the issues we face.'

## Long-term vision

The city council's success in recent years has earned it a long list of awards. They include being crowned the Best Achieving Council in The MJ Achievement Awards in 2014 and 12 months later Council of the Year by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE).

The foundations of that success lay in the council's decision to deal with austerity as early as possible and to galvanise the local authority – and its partners – around a long-term vision. It's included a seven-year pay and conditions agreement with staff designed to give all concerned greater certainty and will deliver £33m of efficiency savings by 2020.

'We have very high ambitions for the city and ourselves,' explains chief executive Peter Sloman. 'Our focus is on growing the local economy, increasing the supply of housing, ensuring we have a sustainable city, improving opportunities for young people and those in deprived communities and being outward looking.'

'In terms of the council itself it's about being as efficient and effective as possible. We have taken 40% out of our cost base and having made the council more efficient we are insourcing work to use that spare capacity and generate resources. It's created a virtuous circle.'

That work – for clients including university colleges and other public sector organisations – includes everything from highways to facilities management. It also takes in one of the council's key strengths, street scene and grounds maintenance, particularly important in a bustling and historic city like Oxford.

The next stage of that evolution, says Peter, will see

## A dedicated

The future shape of local government is being debated in areas across the country and Oxfordshire is among them.

A number of options have been put forward, from creating a single unitary authority for the whole county to creating new unitary authorities from the existing districts.

While the current two-tier system of a county council and five districts (including Oxford City) may not be perfect, says leader Cllr Bob Price, as the old adage goes, 'if it ain't broke, why fix it?'

The debate has provided an opportunity to highlight the importance and advantages of having a dedicated council for a high profile city like Oxford – and the risks involved in losing it.

'Having a single unitary for the whole of Oxfordshire would effectively reduce the city council to the status of a large parish council,' says Cllr Price.

'The whole thrust of Government policy has been driven by localism. Yet this would create a very large council in terms of population – and in a county that's very heterogeneous in terms of demographics, its focus and geography.'

'There are aspects of the current two-tier system that we know can be improved but it can be done within the existing structure. It can happen if there's co-operation between the districts and the county council.' Priorities set by locally based



the creation of Oxford Direct Services, a wholly owned council company that will enable it to step up its trading. This more commercial and proactive approach to service delivery has played an important part in helping the council to reach a point where it is no longer reliant on Government grant.

As well as being the driver for its other key sources of income, business rates and council tax, its financial strategy represents the cornerstone of the ultimate objective to create a truly sustainable city. It has achieved this through close working with the Oxfordshire LEP which has been a strong partner in delivering growth.

### Creating an economy for all

Oxford has many competitive advantages. Aside from the small matter of having a world-leading university, it's home to one of the most important medical research economies on the planet and produces a motoring icon – BMW's Mini. It's well connected by road and rail, has a highly qualified population and is among the most desirable places to live in the country.

On the flip side, its roads are congested, development space is at a

premium, last year it was ranked the least affordable area of the UK for housing and more than a fifth of residents have no or low qualifications.

Five years ago the council put an economic growth strategy in place that set out a narrative for a modern knowledge based service and tourism economy for the city that serves all its residents. That meant addressing the city's housing supply and affordability issues, boosting the city centre retail offer to residents and visitors and nurturing growth across a wide range of industries.

The list of projects either underway or in the pipeline speaks volumes about the strategy's success. For example, the Westgate Centre – delivered by the Westgate Alliance and the council – will create a new £440m retail and leisure destination for the city centre with 3,400 jobs when it opens later this year.

The council has also set up a development framework for the Northern Gateway scheme, a development led by St John's College that will create 500 new homes.

And it has partnered with Grosvenor Estates on Barton Park, an urban extension north east of the city that will provide 885 homes (40% for social rent), a primary school, community hub, shop and park.

The council owns land and assets across the city and has used its portfolio to both kick-start projects and ensure development is sustainable. For example, it is actively involved in over 80% of the major housing schemes in the city – providing land, finance, masterplanning or a combination of the three.

David Edwards, executive director for regeneration and housing, believes the council's stewardship role has been crucial.

'The city council has a long-term commitment and has used its assets effectively. We have an understanding that housing, employment, the economy and community all have to work together to be successful. And above all it's about leadership and direction, an understanding of city regeneration and how cities need to remain relevant and at the forefront of the economy.'

'Oxford is an international brand – we've maximised the talents and opportunities that we have here within our partnerships. It's not something that happens on its own. It needs Oxford civic leadership.'

### Oxford City Council: in numbers

**60+** awards won by the council and its staff over the last five years - including Best Achieving Council in The MJ Achievement Awards

**30%** rise in recycling rates in the last decade, making it the third highest performing city in the country

**£3.8m** of losses prevented by the council's counter-fraud team over the last 18 months

**260,000** calls a year dealt with by customer services with 91% of queries resolved at the first point of contact

**£33m** savings through efficiency and income generation without cuts to frontline services

### The city council's green agenda has led to:

A **35%** fall in roadside nitrogen dioxide levels over the last 10 years

The launch of the first Low Emission Zone outside London and plans for a Zero Emission Zone in the city centre

A **35%** reduction in the carbon footprint of the city

**£250,000** of cycling improvements via the Oxford Cycle City project

# council for an iconic city

elected members and implemented through policies shaped by officers with local knowledge – such as tackling deprivation and climate change – would be under threat from a remote unitary, says Cllr Price.

Supporters of the council include Gwilym Hughes, head of endowment office at Nuffield College, University of Oxford, who says: 'Oxford City Council continues to be an excellent partner with Nuffield College in delivering regeneration in the city centre.'

Chief executive Peter Sloman doesn't believe a single unitary would deliver any savings and that the risks of damaging local governance in city of Oxford's stature are simply too high.

'The city council has worked to champion city government and its value and a globally important place like Oxford needs its own local authority. Its status would be downgraded if it was lost in a sub-regional authority.'

'All of the districts have undergone transformation programmes and the savings they have generated would be lost if they were to be pulled into one unitary. There's also the fact that the city council is regarded as one of the highest performing local authorities in the country and with a track record of success. Why would you put all that at risk?'



Oxford City Council's new £4.76m Rose Hill Community Centre

*Providing the homes people need is key to Oxford's future success. That's why the council is playing a direct role in accelerating housing supply*



## Building homes and communities

Oxford is one of the least affordable cities in England in terms of housing and it's an issue the council is tackling head on.

It recently set up a housing company that will both purchase properties from the market to rent and develop new homes.

The council will provide £61m in loans to its company over the next four years to deliver about 536 affordable homes with a range of tenures to help address the city's acute housing need.

Incorporated in June last year, the company has already received £12.25m towards the purchase of 40% of the 885 dwellings being delivered at Barton Park, the city's most significant housing development in a generation.

The project is a sustainable urban extension to the north east of Oxford led by Barton Oxford LLP, a collaboration between the council and Grosvenor Britain & Ireland (GBI).

David Yaldron, director of GBI, says the award-winning development has been made possible thanks to 'a strong and long-standing partnership with Oxford City Council'.



Construction of housing for the first phase of development at Barton Park, comprising 237 homes in a mixture of tenures, is about to get underway and the first residents are expected to move in by the end of this year.

Councillor Mike Rowley, board member for housing, explains: 'Oxford's housing crisis gets ever more acute, with average house prices now topping £350,000, and therefore becoming unaffordable to those on middle as well as lower incomes.'

'We expect our housing company to be at the forefront of delivering new housing, especially social rented housing, starting with the new development at Barton.'

'It will develop new build housing on council land and also undertake estate regeneration schemes. Through the company, we can influence the pace and type of house building in Oxford and play a direct role in providing homes for the city's key workers.'

Over the past year, house-building in Oxford improved significantly, rising to 383 new homes completed from 332 in 2014-2015. This is close to the city's target of 400 dwellings per year and represents a positive increase in housing completions in comparison to recent years.

In the last decade, 3,843 new homes were completed in the city, which is just shy of the target figure of 4,000 dwellings. This performance is despite the recession in 2008 and the impacts that this had on the house-building market.

With a number of large sites in the city being developed, completion rates are forecast to increase in the next few years and the council expects to meet or surpass its targets.

## Estate regeneration reaches new heights

Oxford City Council has invested £20m to repair and modernise its five tower blocks in a project that underlines its commitment to ensuring good quality affordable accommodation for its tenants.

Built in the 1960s and comprising 348 flats for around 900 people, work commenced on the towers in January 2016 and is expected to be completed in November this year.

Many of the component parts of the buildings had reached the end of their intended useful life. The council believes its investment in comprehensive repairs is the most efficient and cost effective way of maintaining them in a good state of repair for the long term.

There has been no central government grant contribution to the repairs project; it is funded entirely from the council's housing investment programme.

When completed, it's anticipated the repairs will extend the life of the flats by a minimum of 30 years. They

will improve energy efficiency by reducing heat loss, cut fuel bills, reduce fire risk, and increase the value of the flats. The quality of life for residents will also increase with the improved look and feel of the tower blocks.

'This investment reflects the council's commitment to raising the standard and quality of housing for the people

of Oxford,' says Councillor Mike Rowley, board member for housing.

'Adding another 30 years to the life of the tower blocks means guaranteeing the provision of good quality and affordable housing for our residents for another generation.'





A well-connected city

# Producing a West End success story

Major projects are underway that will transform part of central Oxford via a joined up approach to regeneration



The West End of Oxford is undergoing comprehensive transformation as major developments spearheaded by the city council and its partners – the county council, university and private sector – begin to take shape.

Construction of the £440m Westgate Oxford Shopping Centre, which is owned by Westgate Oxford Alliance, a joint venture between Land Securities and The Crown Estate, has reached advanced stages.

The 800,000 sq. ft. development will open its doors to customers in October this year and will have over 100 new stores, 25 restaurants and cafes, a boutique cinema, roof top terrace dining and a wealth of new public spaces.

Up to 1,000 construction jobs have been generated, with a further 3,400 retail positions opening up once the centre is completed.

Located across from the shopping centre is Oxpens, the largest remaining development area in the city centre, which was identified as a strategic priority site in the City Deal and the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan. The council and Nuffield College formed a joint venture company – Oxford West End Development (OXWED) – to spearhead the comprehensive redevelopment of the site in a £200m mixed-use scheme.

OXWED now owns the entire Oxpens site, which will be transformed into a new neighbourhood with between 300 and 500 new homes, together with offices and commercial space for the many new and growing enterprises which want to locate in the heart of the city and near good rail links.

‘We see this site as playing a pivotal key role in

addressing the lack of affordable housing for a wide range of people in Oxford,’ explains Gwilym Hughes, Nuffield College head of endowment office.

‘The regeneration of the West End will be of huge benefit to everyone and I cannot think of a groundbreaking approach like this that has been taken in Oxford before.

‘Everyone realises you cannot do these schemes in isolation and we have now got to see how these sites could fit together.

‘Academic buildings for the College and Oxford University in the West End could be combined with new homes, commercial and leisure buildings to create a “cluster” for the social sciences and vibrant public spaces.’

## THINK YOU KNOW OXFORD?

One of the fastest growing cities in England

Economic output of £6.8bn, making it an important net contributor to the Treasury and in the country's top 10 cities for GVA per capita

It's a diverse city with the third highest ethnic minority population in the southeast

Two-thirds of its jobs are in the knowledge sectors

While 43% of Oxford's residents have degree-level qualifications or above, 22% have no or low qualifications

Around 25% of Oxford's under 16s live below the poverty line

Oxford's free to access buildings have been turned into Wi-Fi hotspots as part of the Government's Super Connected Cities initiative.

Residents and visitors in Oxford are able to connect to free Wi-Fi at various locations across the city, including community centres, museums, libraries and park & ride sites.

The programme is part of a £150m investment to transform the digital capability of UK cities, making them even more attractive places to live, do business, visit and invest in. Millions of visitors, citizens and business men and women can take advantage of this huge boost to free connectivity in the UK.

‘Oxford's huge student population and successful tourist industry will benefit particularly from this very welcome investment in Wi-Fi access,’ says Councillor Bob Price, leader of Oxford City Council.

‘The city council has worked closely with our world famous museums and galleries and public institutions to secure a very wide city centre coverage and the development of some novel apps will follow this initiative.’

Peter Smith, president and lead ambassador, Oxfordshire Chamber of Commerce says: ‘The Chamber in Oxfordshire has campaigned for increased broadband in Oxford and we are encouraged by this announcement.

‘This will help to transform the digital capability of the city, making it even more of an attractive place to do business, visit and invest in.’



# Building an inclusive Oxford

**L**ike many vibrant and diverse cities, Oxford is a place of striking contrasts and it's easy for some communities to be left behind even when the local economy is booming.

Oxford City Council has therefore placed a strong emphasis on ensuring the city is inclusive – whether its sport, culture or access to informal learning.

For example, it helped charities, community groups and voluntary groups with grants to the tune of £2.4m in 2016-17 and every year provides £1.4m of grants to help organisations that support some of the city's most disadvantaged communities.

Examples include more than half a million pounds to organisations providing advice and money management, including Oxford Citizens Advice

Bureau and Oxford Community Work Agency. Some £442,000 has gone to groups providing services to the city's homeless population and £235,000 to encourage inclusion in arts and culture.

The council provided £50,000 for councillors to spend in their wards on local priorities – an important investment for a local authority that council leader Cllr Bob Price says prides itself on being very engaged with all communities.

Many of the grants are focused on tackling deprivation in Oxford.

Two areas of the city – in Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill – were named in the Government's 2015 Indices of Deprivation as among the most deprived 10% of areas in England.

## Supporting young people

The council's in-house youth team has helped more than 25,000 young people over the last four years. The award-winning Youth Ambition team aims to encourage young people from Oxford's disadvantaged communities to broaden their knowledge and skills through informal learning.

Every week the team delivers eight youth clubs, six sports sessions, three girls-only physical activity and wellbeing sessions, and one-on-one advice and guidance on issues such as employment, education and training.

The team also provides £190,000 of grants every year – to provide activities during school holidays, and to provide targeted work to help young people with employment, mental health, anti-social behaviour or sexual health issues. The team's work saves the city about £13m every year by improving young people's health and wellbeing, reducing antisocial behaviour and promoting community cohesion.

## Building 'strong and active communities'

Men in the most deprived area of Oxford die on average 9.7 years younger than those in the least deprived area.

Lifestyles play a significant role in premature death and recent investment in leisure facilities and public health projects have seen significant increases in the number of people taking part in sports and fitness activities. Latest figures have shown that childhood obesity has fallen and life expectancy increased in these areas.

The council has a corporate objective to build 'strong and active communities, including by providing high-quality community and leisure facilities – and making them accessible to low-income families.

It owns 19 community centres and five leisure facilities across Oxford and has spent millions of pounds on improvements. The council has invested £129m to create new community centres, culture and leisure facilities along with improvements to sports pavilions and outdoor gym equipment in parks.

The council also recently won planning permission to create a £4.9m sports park at Horspath, which will include football, cricket and softball pitches, practice areas, pavilion with changing rooms and a car park across 39 acres. Work will start on the facility this spring.

The council-owned leisure facilities are run by registered charity Fusion Lifestyle, which has enabled significant revenue savings while delivering improved and inclusive leisure services.

Discounts are provided to make the facilities accessible for low-income families, including reduced costs of admission and free swimming sessions for young people.

On top of all this, the council's award-winning sport and physical activity and Youth Ambition teams encourage people to keep fit with a wide range of activities.

Council investment in a wide range of community activities and facilities is paying dividends in the shape of a healthier, happier population



## Investing in local culture and the arts

Oxford City Council is the only council in Oxfordshire that has continued to invest in culture and the arts.

It devotes £285,000 a year to 14 core cultural partners – money which helps to leverage several million pounds worth of partnership investment from sources including Arts Council England, charitable trusts and businesses.

In a recent letter to the Oxford Mail, organisations such as Modern Art Oxford, Film Oxford and the Oxford Playhouse praised the council's continued funding into culture and arts and warned that proposed changes to local government could have a significant detrimental impact on the cultural life of the city.

The council delivers around 300 events in Oxford each year on a large-scale city-wide basis as well as numerous local community events. It is also working with the Heritage Lottery Fund on a £2.4m project to redevelop the Museum of Oxford into an important social history centre celebrating the city's culture and people.





'Oxford City Council has demonstrated highly effective leadership and cross sector collaboration to support the development of a low carbon local economy.

They have also invested directly to help embed community energy infrastructure and to tackle the threat of flooding – aware of the long-term public purse savings and financial returns achievable. Without that leadership and joint working, the city and region would be less successful and less sustainable.'

*Barbara Hammond, CEO of the Low Carbon Hub*



## A cleaner, greener city

Sometimes it's easier to let the numbers do the talking.

More than 6,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide have been removed from Oxford's atmosphere thanks to a wide range of projects led by the city council. This is equivalent to taking 1,553 medium-sized cars off the road and keeping them off the road every year.

The council has a corporate objective to create a clean and green Oxford, which aims to build 'an attractive and clean city that minimises its environmental impact by cutting carbon, waste and pollution'.

Projects that have contributed to the CO2 reduction include winning £1.2m of EU funding in 2012 and using this to leverage in more than £14m to fund climate change schemes across Oxford such as the Low Carbon Hub, a hydro project at Osney Lock, and solar panels on a primary school and Oxford Bus Company.

Together with Innovate UK, the council has funded Project ERIC (Energy Resources for Integrated Communities), which has seen external wall cladding, cavity wall insulation and solar panels installed in and on the council's housing stock.

Another example is the installation of solar panels on new capital projects, including a leisure centre and community centre. The council has also upgraded its estate with LED lighting, high-efficiency boilers and insulation.

On top of this, the council has also helped to introduce a Low Emission Zone in Oxford city centre, which requires buses to be low-emitting vehicles; and invested £300,000 in cycling infrastructure across the city.

Work to tackle polluting emissions has seen nitrogen dioxide levels at the roadside in Oxford city centre fall by 35% in the last decade.

### Future plans

Going forward, the council is planning innovative new schemes to help reduce carbon emissions in Oxford even further. These include installing 100 electric vehicle charging stations in Oxford's narrow residential streets using funding from the Office for Low Emission Vehicles. The local authority is also investigating the creation of a heat network under Oxford, which would see businesses in the city centre share excess heat, and is project managing a feasibility study into the creation of a Zero Emission Zone.

Overall, it is estimated that Oxford produces one million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year, meaning all these measures have reduced the city's total CO2 output by 0.6%. However, it is also estimated that the council is responsible for just 1% of total CO2 to Oxford's air.

### Clean and green

The cleanliness of the city is a crucial factor in

Investment in a comprehensive approach to environmental issues has earned Oxford City Council a reputation as a leader on climate change



maintaining the health and quality of life of those who live and work there. Providing a high quality waste and recycling collection service sits hand-in hand with improving the cleanliness of streets, neighbourhoods and open spaces, making Oxford an attractive and clean place that residents, visitors and city workers enjoy.

The council has launched a series of 'clean and green' campaigns in targeted areas where resources are concentrated on deep-cleaning, removing fly-tipping and graffiti and talking to residents to encourage them to increase their recycling efforts. Three areas have benefited over the past year and two further campaigns are planned for 2017.

Oxford works closely with Oxfordshire's district and county councils to reduce the volume of waste and increase the proportion that is recycled. Almost 50% of waste is now recycled, despite Oxford having an unusually young and transient population.

Taken together these many measures are helping Oxford to become a low carbon, low waste city.

## Protecting the city from floods

Oxford sits on two rivers, the Thames and Cherwell, and has been badly hit by flooding in the past. That's why Oxford City Council is leading on work to protect hundreds of homes across Oxford from future floods.

The council, which is not the flood authority for Oxford, won £2.2m of funding to create the Northway and Marston Flood Alleviation Scheme. Funding came from the Environment Agency (£1.6m) and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (£600,000).

The project will protect 110 homes from flooding by creating water storage areas that will temporarily hold floodwater in the event of torrential rain.

Construction started in October 2016 and is expected to be completed this summer. The council has also so far contributed £1.5m towards the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme.

Led by the Environment Agency, it will help to protect the 1,800 properties, businesses, and transport infrastructure including the railway and key roads. Work is expected to start on the scheme in 2018 and be completed by 2022.



- **£8.5 million of efficiency savings in the last four years without cuts in services**



- **60+ awards in the last five years including Best Achieving Council**



- **19 community centres and five leisure facilities supporting one of the most creative communities in the UK**



- **Regeneration in the West End of Oxford creating more than 4,000 jobs**



- **£323 million investment in affordable housing and estate regeneration**

For details see [www.oxford.gov.uk](http://www.oxford.gov.uk)

