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Rural facilities and services in West Oxfordshire

March 2023

FRESH FRUIT AND VEG
INCLUDING LOCAL PRODUCE

Broccoli	Lettuce <small>iceberg</small>
Cabbage	<small>cos</small>
Savoy Cabbage	Mushrooms <small>large</small>
Carrots	<small>flat</small>
Cauliflower	Onions <small>red</small>
Celery	<small>white</small>
Cucumber	<small>spring</small>
Garlic	Peppers
Leeks	Potatoes <small>Baking</small>
	<small>old</small>
	<small>Maris</small>
	<small>Wentworth</small>
	Tomatoes <small>large</small>



Prepared For
WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL



Funded by
UK Government

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UP**



Rural facilities and services in West Oxfordshire

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Introduction and context

West Oxfordshire District Council has commissioned this independent research to help establish a clear baseline of current rural service provision in West Oxfordshire and set out how the Council can support key rural services moving forwards. The focus of the study, which forms part of the Council's local delivery plans for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund covers all communities within the district, understanding that both small and larger service centres contribute to the wellbeing of residents.

The Plunkett Foundation were commissioned to complete the research, identify any vulnerabilities for rural services and make recommendations to the Council. As part of the study Plunkett have engaged other agencies and infrastructure organisations to obtain their views on how best to maintain services in the district.

West Oxfordshire is one of the most rural districts in the south east of England and is characterised by market towns, villages and hamlets of varying sizes. Many of these are located in the Cotswolds National Landscape (formerly referred to as the Cotswolds AONB) which covers about a third of the District. The services that hold these communities together are currently under pressure and the reasons for this are varied and complex. They include pressure from changing shopping habits, a shift in working arrangements and the difference in property value between commercial and residential use. While there are some relevant studies to help us understand the provision of rural services, none are specific to West Oxfordshire.

There are already several successful examples where communities have come together in West Oxfordshire and avoided the loss of key local services by managing these assets as a community. These include the Red Lion Pub in Northmoor and Finstock Community Shop. The Council applauds this activity and is keen to support and help where possible. The allocation of UKSPF and REPF funds that will be administered by the Council presents a real opportunity to do this.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund¹ is a £2.6bn fund, launched by the UK Government in 2022 and succeeds the EU structural funds. The intention is that the funding will go straight to local places right across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to invest in three local priorities; communities and place, support for local businesses and people and skills.

The Rural England Prosperity Fund² is a complementary fund to the UKSPF, providing additional support to eligible local authorities to top-up their UKSPF allocations in order to fund capital projects for small businesses and community infrastructure. The Rural Fund is integrated into the UKSPF which supports productivity and prosperity in places that need it most.

West Oxfordshire District Council is responsible for the delivery of both funds in the authority area.

Any initiatives or projects, related to rural facilities or services that develop as a result of this study will be supported by the Council, using funding allocated through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). In accordance with the 'community and place' and 'supporting local businesses' investment priorities, any projects supported must align with UKSPF or REPF guidelines.

¹ [UK Shared Prosperity Fund: prospectus - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus)

² [Rural England Prosperity Fund: prospectus - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/rural-england-prosperity-fund-prospectus)

Who are the Plunkett Foundation?

Plunkett Foundation is a national charity with a vision for resilient, thriving and inclusive rural communities. To achieve this, Plunkett supports people in rural areas to set up and run a wide range of businesses which are genuinely owned by local communities, whereby members have equal and democratic control. They represent community businesses in rural and urban areas throughout the UK, from shops and pubs through to woodlands, farms and fisheries.

Through support for community businesses, Plunkett has a specific mission to create innovative, impactful and inclusive spaces.

They achieve this by helping community businesses to:

- Provide a wider range of services and amenities that communities value and need
- Stimulate the local economy through localised supply chains
- Boost opportunities for employment, training and volunteering
- Benefit people who are most disadvantaged and excluded in today's society
- Tackle climate change through delivery of environmentally sustainable initiatives
- Harness digital technologies to enhance business performance
- Promote equality, diversity and inclusion by creating safe and welcoming spaces for all.

In practical terms, Plunkett raises awareness of the community business model UK-wide and provides business support and training to help these businesses start-up and go on to thrive. As a membership organisation, we also seek to represent the interests of rural community businesses.

The research has been completed as part of the Information Hub, a service launched by Plunkett in 2020 to undertake relevant research, policy and public affairs in order to support the community business sector to thrive.

Plunkett are based in West Oxfordshire, with their head offices located in Woodstock.

Methodology:

The research undertaken in support of this study has been completed over a 7 week period, starting in January 2023. The work has consisted of a range of activities aimed at developing an understanding of current service provision and identifying the needs and gaps that may exist within the district.

To enable the research to make recommendations to West Oxfordshire District Council in respect of the UKSPF and REPF allocations, Plunkett have completed a range of activities, including:

- Review the most recent population summary published by Oxfordshire County Council
- Compilation of Community Wellbeing Index reports using the Cooperative Foundation data, focussing on areas of lower service provision and higher service provision
- Desktop review and update of the Local Plan Settlement Sustainability matrix from 2016

- Desktop review of 6 'made' neighbourhood plans in West Oxfordshire District, reviewing policies and recommendations related to rural service provision and access
- Survey sent to parish meetings, parish and town councils and ward members, responses received from 56 contacts representing 40 (out of 81) parish settlements
- Survey sent to community buildings in West Oxfordshire district, responses received from 17 of 49 community buildings
- Meetings with relevant infrastructure bodies, including:
 - Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils
 - Community First Oxfordshire
 - Oxford Diocese
- Meetings with local authority representatives
 - Oxfordshire County Council – Transport
 - Oxfordshire County Council – 20 minute neighbourhoods
 - West Oxfordshire District Council – Planning
 - West Oxfordshire District Council – Community Wellbeing
- Reviewing feedback and advice from the Climate Team at the Council
- Creation of West Oxfordshire Business Insights, to highlight work already taking place in the district which could be replicated elsewhere.

Overview of the District

To provide context to the research, Plunkett reviewed the most recent “West Oxfordshire District Population Summary” published by Oxfordshire County Council in mid-2021³ to understand the demographic make-up of the district. The summary highlights different types of user need which exists within the district, which may be supported or addressed through the services identified in this research.

The West Oxfordshire District Summary showed that:

- Population - In mid-2019 there were 110,600 residents in West Oxfordshire
 - There were 3,596 people aged 85+ in West Oxfordshire district
 - Between 2009 and 2019 the population increased by +6.6%, just below the rate in Oxfordshire (+7.8%) and England (+8%)
 - The population pyramid shows an increase in the number of young people aged 5-9, working age people aged 50-59 and in older people aged 65+
- Population Forecast - The housing-led forecasts show the population of West Oxfordshire increasing from 109,800 in 2018 to 131,100 by 2028 (+21,300 - 19%)
- English Indices of Multiple Deprivation – In Oxfordshire, the most deprived areas are in parts of Chipping Norton, Witney East and Witney South all in the 40% most deprived areas nationally
- English Indices of Multiple Deprivation – When looking at the IMD rankings within West Oxfordshire more of the districts smaller and rurally isolated areas are included:
 - Parts of Alvescot & Filkins, Carterton North West, Chadlington & Churchill, Eynsham & Cassington, and Kingham, Rollright & Enstone are within the 20% most deprived areas in the district.

³ [WestOxon JSNA 2021 \(oxfordshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/oxfordshire-journal/2021/04/2021-journal-1)

- Between 2015 and 2019, West Oxfordshire has become relatively less deprived – from being 307th out of 326 in 2015, to being 301st out of 317, where 1 is most deprived and 317 is least deprived.
- There is an average of 1.69 privately-owned cars for each household that owns a van or car in the district. 12.5% of households (3861) do not own a vehicle at all. Whilst the Council has worked to consider connectivity more broadly than just the private car, this statistic is useful to understand the overall potential for connecting with service centres independently.

The overall picture shows the District to have only a small number of more deprived communities, as defined by statistics. However as is often the case in rural areas there is likely to be communities with hidden needs that exist, for example related to an ageing population or the growth in the number of younger families, with children, aged between 5-9 living locally. Services meeting the needs of these groups will have greater importance relative to where these individuals are living.

To consider these user groups further, statistics relating to Income Deprivation affecting children and older people were reviewed to identify specific communities within the district with higher levels of need.

- In relation to children, where statistics considers families with children aged 0 – 15, Chipping Norton, Witney Central and Witney East are statistically the most deprived areas. Chadlington and Churchill and Eynsham and Cassington are also areas where deprivation affecting children exists.
- In relation to older people, where statistics considers those age 60 or over who experience income deprivation Witney East, Eynsham and Cassington and Witney North are the most deprived areas.

Community profiles

To develop an understanding of the 'types' of communities that exist within the district, Plunkett has created a number of community wellbeing profiles, using the Coop Foundation's Community Wellbeing Index⁴. This data has not been compiled by Plunkett and is not specific to this piece of research, the information has been included in this research to provide further context to the importance of services within certain communities in the district.

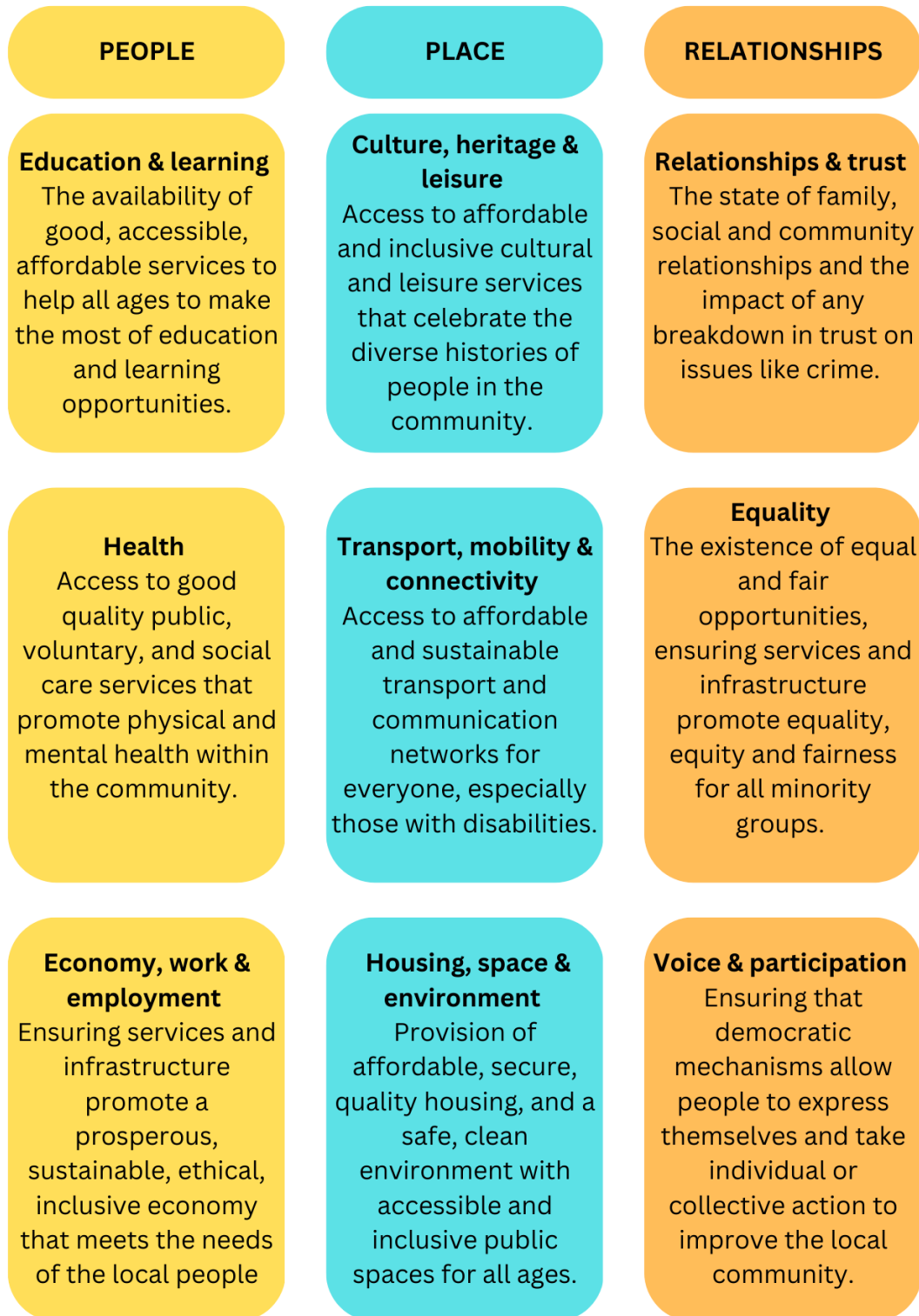
These reports can be generated at a postcode area level and provide an insight about the make-up of a community. For the purposes of this study, Plunkett has created scores for parish settlements with higher levels of service provision, average levels of service provision (access to food retailers, social facilities and other meeting places), and no service provision.

The data produced by the Coop Foundation has been used by Oxfordshire County Council in relation to their "20 minute neighbourhoods"⁵ work, which is referenced later in this report.

⁴ [Home | Wellbeing Index \(coop.co.uk\)](https://www.coop.co.uk/wellbeing-index)

⁵ [Workbook: HPS dashboard \(tableau.com\)](#)

To aid the reader in understanding the scores provided in this research, here is the explanation of the 9 score areas under the 3 thematic headings (Pillars) of “People,” “Place” and “Relationships”:



The full reports for each post code area can be found in the appendix of this report, however the highlights (with scores out of a total of 100) included:

Higher Service Areas			
Postcode area	Community Wellbeing score	Highlights	Scores lower than national average
OX18	60 (National Average - NA) - 52	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture, heritage & leisure – 80 (NA 52) • Voice & participation – 74 (NA 52) • Economy, work & employment – 71 (NA 57) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships & trust – 46 (NA 52) • Equality – 46 (NA 52)
OX7 (Chipping Norton)	61 (NA 52)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture, heritage & leisure – 84 (NA 52) • Education & learning – 77 (NA 53) • Voice & participation – 69 (NA 52) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships & trust – 46 (NA 52) • Health – 30 (NA 50)

Average Service Areas			
Postcode	Score	Highlights	Scores lower than NA
OX29	60 (NA52)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships & trust – 72 (NA 52) • Culture, heritage & leisure – 66 (NA 52) • Voice & participation – 66 (NA 52) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equality – 38 (NA 52) • Education & learning – 45 (NA 53) • Health – 44 (NA 50) • Economy, work & employment – 53 (NA 57) • Housing, space & environment – 48 (NA 53)
OX7 (Kingham)	50 (NA 52)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture, heritage & leisure – 69 (NA 52) • Transport, mobility & connectivity – 68 (NA 47) • Education & learning – 67 (NA 53) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health – 13 (NA 50) • Housing, space & environment – 45 (NA 53) • Equality – 23 (NA 52)

No Service Areas			
Postcode	Score	Highlights	Scores lower than NA
OX7 (Swerford)	51 (NA 52)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport, mobility & connectivity – 68 (NA 47) • Economy, work & employment – 65 (NA 57) • Voice & participation – 65 (NA 52) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health – 31 (NA 50) • Housing, space & environment – 30 (NA 53) • Equality – 30 (NA 52) • Education & learning – 51 (NA 53)
OX18 (Swinbrook)	54 (NA 52)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport, mobility & connectivity – 77 (NA 47) • Culture, heritage & leisure – 77 (NA 52) • Voice & participation – 71 (NA 52) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education & learning – 49 (NA 53) • Health – 43 (NA 50) • Economy, work & employment – 53 (NA 57) • Housing, space & environment 34 (NA 53) • Equality – 18 (NA 52)

The scores produced are pretty reflective of the fact that that West Oxfordshire District is seen, statistically at least, as having little deprivation. The overall scores are therefore not dramatically impacted when comparing higher and lower serviced areas. However, the number of lower than national average scores does increase the less services that are provided.

More significant is the consistently low scores related to “Equality” and “Health” across all service areas. Any action taken by the Council, to protect and enhance rural facilities and services provision in West Oxfordshire should use these data areas as priorities for any businesses or groups supported.

For example, in relation to “equality” any support offered by the authority should promote and encourage inclusive access to services and consider any inequities (or barriers) that may exist within a local area that could be addressed by a supported service provider.

In the Community Wellbeing Index reports⁶, published by the Coop Foundation the equality domain is referenced in relation to the core pillar of “Relationships” recognising the need for positive connections to support community wellbeing. In the context of West Oxfordshire an assumption could be made that rurality is contributing to higher levels of inequality, with residents experiencing isolation as a result of where they live. Service providers therefore need to proactively engage with residents in more rural areas, for example through adjusting their operating hours or working with local transport providers to connect users with the services they need at the times when they need them.

⁶ [the community wellbeing index - full report.pdf \(coop.co.uk\)](#)

In relation to “Health,” which is referenced in relation to the key pillar of “People” in the Wellbeing Index reports, alongside education and learning and economy, work and employment, the scope for action as part of the UKSPF and REPF work could be broader. The central ambition of this pillar is to create good physical and mental health within a community by “providing accessible and good quality services, opportunities and assets, including public and voluntary sector health and social care services and initiatives”. Therefore any service provider that is actively seeking to engage and support local residents with their physical and mental wellbeing would be worthy recipients of any support provided by the Council longer term.

Changes since the 2016 Local Plan: Settlement Sustainability Report

The most recent and comprehensive review of rural services in West Oxfordshire was in 2020 and was included as part of a comprehensive countywide Rural Services study completed by Community First Oxfordshire⁷. Whilst there is not a lot of district specific content in the published report, as it was a countywide review, it is clear that the rurality and sparsity of some communities in the district will be having an adverse impact on residents if key services related to retail, banking, social activities and health are not provided locally. Targeting smaller, rural communities for initial engagement in relation to UKSPF and REPF opportunities could potentially address any hidden needs that may exist but are not identifiable at a higher level data review.

Using the information contained in West Oxfordshire District Council’s own 2016 sustainability report, Plunkett has updated the matrix information via mapping activity and on-site visits. From this review it is positive to note that the district’s service provision has overall remained relatively stable in the past 7 years.

However, as you would expect for that period of time, a smaller number of individual communities have seen significant change. Understanding the impacts of local business closures is picked up in survey questions referenced later in this report.

An overall summary, having reviewed the businesses that do exist and the services that are provided, shows that:

- 7 of 81 parish settlements (which includes parish and town council areas, as well as parish meetings) have no services at all in the community
- 17 of 81 parish settlements only have a church
- 27 out of 81 parish settlements have at least 1 shop (which sells food)
- 44 out of 81 parish settlements have at least 1 pub
- Only Witney and Chipping Norton still currently have a physical bank presence, however please note that the last bank in Chipping Norton is due to close summer 2023⁸

Since the 2016 Settlement Sustainability Report there are a number of examples of where communities have lost the “last remaining” of a specific asset type. For example:

- Rollright – Has no pub now, when it did in 2016
- Stonesfield – Has no pub now, when it did in 2016
- Stanton Harcourt – Has no shop now, when it did in 2016

⁷ [Oxfordshire Rural Services Report 2020 is here! | Community First Oxfordshire \(communityfirstoxon.org\)](#)

⁸ [Barclays bank will close its branch in Chipping Norton this summer | Banbury Guardian](#)

Parish and Town Councils, Parish Meetings and Ward Councillor survey

As part of the research Plunkett Foundation issued a survey, via West Oxfordshire District Council, to representatives of all parish and town councils and parish meetings. The survey was also sent to Ward Councillors too. The survey received 56 responses representing 40 (out of 81) parish settlements.

The intention was to ascertain a validation of the matrix review but also to obtain the grassroots intelligence related to the changes that has taken place in a parish settlement area. Survey respondents were also asked what improvements would benefit the local area and what additional services are needed.

The full set of survey responses is available as an appendix to this report and a summary of the responses received in relation to the “free text” question can be seen below:

What do you consider to have been the main changes in your parish, town or ward during the last 5 years in respect of service provision?

- Loss of banks was the most common answer provided
- Shop closures and the loss of associated services, like Post Offices also referenced as being a common change experienced
- Some of the larger communities make reference to the impacts that housing developments have had on their communities, with the current infrastructure reportedly not able to fully support all the residents
- Reduction in bus services also referenced as negatively impact the ability to access services locally
- There a small number of responses that indicate they have seen little or no change, and in the case of Ducklington parish that they have seen a new supermarket open in that time.

What improvements, if any to local services or facilities do you think would benefit the local community?

- Bus services featured most frequently in comments related to “improvements” for access to services – the majority came from smaller communities (14 out of 56) and there are comments specifically referencing set communities, which may offer an opportunity for further engagement
- Improvements to the natural and built environment also featured prominently, with better play facilities, 20 mph schemes and improvements to specific buildings referenced
- There were a number of answers that identified specific projects for a parish area, with a shop, café, access to a bank and a GP surgery noted as ways of improving an area
- There were also references made to set demographics, particularly activities related to young people.

What additional services would benefit your parish, town or ward need?

There are some really interesting proposals for specific communities that would be worth reviewing following the publication of this research. For example, there are parish and town councils with aspirations to see retail and café facilities, with a priority on basic and affordable food items reference.

The other comments can be grouped and summarised as follows:

- More regular or improved bus services, or the reimplementation of former routes
- Improved leisure facilities, particularly related to sporting activities for young people
- NHS dentistry
- Green energy supply
- Improved car parking
- Review of planning rules related to the number of holiday lets within a set community.

Community Buildings survey

As part of the research Plunkett Foundation issued a further survey to village halls and community buildings, via Community First Oxfordshire. This work was completed on the understanding that the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector plays a considerable role in the provision of services in West Oxfordshire. In many communities they are operating from within community buildings.

The survey, which received responses from 17 of 49 community buildings, asked about what activities are offered within the hall. The full set of survey responses is available as an appendix to this report, the responses can be summarised as follows:

- All survey respondents stated that they provide social facilities of some form, whether that is organised community events or more formalised activities such as hosting cafes or pop-up pubs
- The most common answer related to “hosted services” was those providing childcare facilities, including parent and carer groups, playgroups and toddlers etc.
- 8 of the 17 respondents stated that they had good or very good internet connectivity and that they are offering free Wi-Fi to their hall users
- One of the respondents had indicated that they are now providing a co-working space

Whilst the responses do not represent all the community buildings in the district, a review of the capacity of other buildings (that did not reply to the survey) indicates that the majority of services identified in the surveys could be replicated and provided in other areas. It is worth noting that it is highly likely that many other buildings are in fact already offering similar services, which have not been picked up via the survey.

The other opportunity that is presented by reviewing the capacity of the community buildings, is the potential for these community assets to “host” specific services such as shops or pubs in areas where these are not available anywhere else within the parish settlement. Also related to the concept of “hosting” services, there is also a growing opportunity presented with businesses co-locating within church buildings too.⁹ Places like Kencot, Langford, Over Norton and Standlake, where the only other facility available to the community is the church could be explored as places to integrate new services to support residents in these areas.

The survey responses made clear that there is a genuine desire to complete community consultations, as a way to ascertain what other improvements would benefit local areas and provide evidence to support any improvements required to be made to community buildings.

⁹ [Report Published: Exploring community ownership of churches with ‘Bridging the Gap’ - Heritage Trust Network](#)

The views expressed by representatives of community buildings, in relation to local consultations, is in fitting with the advice provided by Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils and Community First Oxfordshire in response to this research. Both organisations recognised the benefits of local community consultation activity – with community-led or parish plans referenced as a great model for this work.

West Oxfordshire Business insight:

Amongst the growing network of success community businesses to have been established in West Oxfordshire District is the community-run Tackley Village Shop¹⁰. This is an example of colocation with another community building, with nearly 20 years of successful trade.

The business has been successfully trading from within an annex of the village hall since 2004, providing access to a range of retail goods alongside a café and post office facility. The business is run by a small number of paid part-time staff, supported by a network of volunteers from within the community.

Notably the business has made a commitment to support other local businesses in the area, therefore having a positive impact on the wider economy in Oxfordshire. They sell meats from a local butchers, fresh fruit and vegetables from local suppliers and provide access to North Aston's nearby organic farm produce – through pre-ordered vegetable boxes.

Given that there is already 10 established/trading community businesses in West Oxfordshire, the model could be promoted (with local opportunities for peer learning) as a way local residents could protect local services.

Transport connectivity in West Oxfordshire

A review of the transport provision in West Oxfordshire shows that at a high-level, the district appears well served by transport routes. There is an established bus network, running within and out of the district area. This network connects with an arterial rail line, providing good connectivity with service centres – both within and outside the district. There is a higher than average level of community transport service operating within West Oxfordshire also, further strengthening the provision of transport locally.

Plunkett engaged with Oxfordshire County Council to understand the transport operation and were directed to the local transport and connectivity plan¹¹ that was adopted by the authority in July 2022. The overall objectives of “reducing the need to travel” and “making walking, cycling, public and shared transport the natural first choice” are both relevant in terms of supporting residents in West Oxfordshire to connect with services.

Since before the pandemic, there have been significantly less passengers using the transport, particularly bus, network. The reality is that these lower numbers place additional pressures on the commercial operators providing the best value for the routes they service. To make significant changes to any routes operated would require a huge amount of planning and there would need to be a clear demand for any changes from an increased customer base.

When reviewing the survey responses, referenced earlier in the report, there was some apparent discontent with transport provision in the district. However what was expressed could be also interpreted as being related to routes and timings not meeting current

¹⁰ [Tackley Village Shop – Welcome to Tackley](#)

¹¹ [Local Transport and Connectivity Plan | Oxfordshire County Council](#)

community needs. Rather than there being wider discontent that there is absolutely no service provision at all. Creating more 'purposeful' journeys and helping residents to access retail, banking, social and health services at set times could ease some of the negative feelings expressed in the surveys. Identifying the most valuable journeys through community consultations would help to engage current and potential customers in the process.

The community transport network could also potentially meet some of the specific transport demands in the district. These operators have greater flexibility overall, however even they must also meet the commercial demands of running the services. Therefore the more informal community transport schemes, such as car clubs or good neighbour schemes may be a more appropriate way of responding to an identified need. Furthermore, if such initiatives were supported to be provided through electric vehicles, with an increased capacity and network of charge points this could positively contribute to climate action measures. For community transport providers looking at altering their level of service, there is also funding available from Oxfordshire County Council to support this.

A recommendation for addressing transport gaps could be to complete community consultations, or 'demand stimulation' activity. Evidence of greater passenger numbers, if routes or timings were to be altered to access set service centres could be influential in any discussion with an operator. Furthermore, community consultations would provide a grassroots point of view about the potential for creating more multi-service hubs within the district, with passengers able to access to multiple services in one place and ultimately reducing the need to travel.

An increase in peripatetic services (health, retail, post office etc.) could also be actively encouraged within the district to meet identified needs in set communities, with UKSPF and REPF funding supporting the creation of "host" facilities in key places. Again grassroots evidence would help to influence any roll out and creation of more multi-service centres.

Oxfordshire 20 minute neighbourhoods

A significant amount of work has been completed by Oxfordshire County Council in relation to the creation of "20 minute neighbourhoods" within the county. These are essentially places where residents can meet most of their daily needs within a short walk or cycle. The council has created dashboards to illustrate the presence of 20 minute neighbourhoods across the county, and having engaged with the team responsible for the data the following points were referenced as being relevant in the context of West Oxfordshire:

- The rural hinterlands, on the fringes of larger market towns or service centres have worked well in relation to creating "20 minute neighbourhood model." There is evidence that people are travelling to the outskirts of a service centre and then using other forms of transport (Inc. walking and cycling) to actively travel within the settlement
- In the more rurally sparse communities the "20 minute" footprint covers clusters of smaller communities, with the provision of a variety of services across the communities key in this regard
- In relation to tracking access to health care/service provision in a 20 minute neighbourhood area it is a very difficult time to model this exactly in every neighbourhood. The primary care model is in a period of considerable change and whilst the growth of social and community care, including social prescribing is supporting more people to live independently a lot of this information is held at a grassroots level. Understanding the location of green and natural spaces, offering the potential for recreation and exercise and also what local social prescribing activity is taking place would help to understand a communities wellbeing

- In South and Vale district, the authority is supporting the creation of community-led plans, with the intention of creating an accurate asset map for the district

In relation to the delivery of UKSPF and REPF support, it would be useful to consider how service providers supported are contributing to local 20 minute neighbourhoods within in the district – either established ones, or through creating new ones. This could also build on recent research being conducted in Oxfordshire relating to the development of “transport hubs” which aims to connect active travel routes with other forms of transport (bus/rail). It could also link to the wider health agenda and connect with Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs).

Identifying and understanding businesses and sectors that most vulnerable and at risk

Since the 2016 Settlement Sustainability Report was completed, rural service providers have endured a global pandemic and a significant disruption to trade. They have also mitigated the impacts of post-Brexit rules relating to supply chains and immigrant workforce visas. The network of businesses and VCSE organisations are also currently facing an unprecedented cost of living and energy price crises that is being exacerbated by war in mainland Europe. In simplest terms, businesses, of all sizes, have faced significant challenges in the past 6.5 years.

In West Oxfordshire the most significant decline in business numbers (since 2016) have related to:

- Banks
- Post Offices
- Village shops
- Pubs

This largely reflects a similar decline being experienced in other rural areas nationwide. The challenges experienced by the hospitality sector has in particular been well document, with the enforced periods of closure during the pandemic and the current rising operating costs undermining the business model for many operating in the sector. On the whole smaller operators (in all sectors) will be feeling the pressures of the cost of living and energy price crises if they are no longer on a fixed tariff energy contract, and are operating with little reserves available to the business.

Given the identified vulnerabilities in the hospitality trade it could be beneficial to engage with sector bodies such as Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA)¹², or the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA)¹³ in terms of delivering any support as a result of this research. Furthermore the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)¹⁴ should be engaged in the local delivery of advice and support and be invited to join any delivery groups or partnerships that are convened by the council.

There are also well document challenges for leisure centres and sports facilities, which will impact people in West Oxfordshire. Positively the announcement of a £63m support fund, delivered by Sport England¹⁵ should help the sector, however operators could benefit from

¹² [Home - CAMRA - Campaign for Real Ale](#)

¹³ [Home | BBPA \(beerandpub.com\)](#)

¹⁴ [FSB | The Federation of Small Businesses | FSB, The Federation of Small Businesses](#)

¹⁵ [New funding to help keep leisure centres with pools afloat | Sport England](#)

longer term energy efficiency and resilience advice should this be incorporated in to any UKSPF support rolled out.

Whilst the decline in business numbers has negatively impacted a range of communities nationwide, the closures in some areas have been mitigated by action led by the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. As referenced earlier in the report, community buildings such as village halls or churches are hosting more and more VCSE services. Notably in terms of “replacing” lost businesses, the community-ownership sector has also seen significant growth over the past 20 years. The community shops sector for example, has grown from just 9 shops nationally in 2000 to 411 today. Similarly the number of community pubs trading has grown from just 4, to over 160 today. Because these businesses are owned outright by several hundred local shareholders, and can evolve in line with community needs, they are celebrated for long term survival rates of 96%.

The positive impact of the VCSE sector should be celebrated and nurtured through UKSPF and REPF support, however it also needs to be acknowledged that the movement is also heavily reliant on a fatigued network of volunteers. Supporting these individuals is therefore crucial in terms of protecting their contribution in the long term. Furthermore finding ways of bringing through a new generation of volunteers, to support those in place, as well as those leaving the sector is the priority for the sector.

In answer to the research question about **how can businesses at risk be more easily identified** by the council, the feedback received (from surveys and local infrastructure partners) is that **this should be community-led**. The recommendation to promote and support community-led plans could help to identify potential individual businesses at risk, and through involving organisations such as those engaged during this study, relationships could be brokered with multiple sectors at a hyper local level.

As reported above, looking at national trends highlighted that hospitality businesses, particularly those with low/diminished reserves that are facing some of the greatest challenges right now. Also those businesses operating from hard to heat / hard (expensive) to treat premises are vulnerable because of the energy price crisis. There is however no overarching data set that would be able to identify these businesses, locally-led conversations and community consultations could be a more suitable way of identifying these businesses in the district.

It is also not only the provision of grant funding or financial support that could make a difference in terms of supporting vulnerable businesses. The provision of advice and support to review and refresh business plans and cash-flow forecasts, can help to support short and medium term operations. There would also be benefit in rolling out a programme of energy efficiency audits amongst rural business operators, with the intention of identifying simple improvements the premise and cost saving measures relating to more efficient energy usage.

Protecting ‘Assets of Community Value’

A number of communities in West Oxfordshire have used powers afforded to them as part of the Localism Act 2011, which enables them to register Assets of Community Value (ACV)¹⁶ with West Oxfordshire District Council.

The intention of registering an ACV is to provide communities with an opportunity for a “Community Right to Bid” on those assets should they ever become available for sale. The

¹⁶ [What are Assets of Community Value \(ACV\)? - MyCommunity](#)

ACV will remain on the register for a period of 5 years, at which point it would need be registered again or removed from the register.

This research has reviewed the current ACVs that have been registered with and rejected by the council, as well as those that have now expired or been removed from the register.

The ACV overview for the district is:

- 10 ACVs currently listed – 6 pubs / 2 allotments / 1 hotel / 1 open space
- 5 rejected ACVs – 1 church (x 3 applications) / 1 pub / 1 police station
- 8 ACVs removed – 6 pubs / 1 open space / 1 play park

The fact that pubs have been registered most is reflective of the challenges that are currently being experienced by the wider hospitality sector. Furthermore CAMRA have been very effective in mobilising their national and local memberships to utilise ACVs as way of protecting pub buildings.

The most common reason given for “rejections” in West Oxfordshire related to those listing the asset not being able to articulate the social value of the asset (a requirement under section 88 of the Localism Act). This is something that could be improved through community consultations helping to articulate the value of an asset to the local area.

Understanding that the purpose of ACVs is to ultimately support the potential for a Community Right to Bid to bring the asset in to community-ownership, this research has used the survey with parish and town councils, parish meetings and ward councillors to assess the level of understanding of how the legislation works. The survey also reviewed the awareness of the administration processes that groups are required to complete.

Responses from surveys:

- 14 (our of 56) respondents said they know about ACVs and also how to register them with the local authority
- 7 respondents said they knew about ACVs but did not know how to register the them with the local authority
- 5 had no knowledge of ACVs or how to register them

When questioned about whether they understood how ACVs could potentially lead to a community-ownership opportunity the respondents showed:

- 17 said they knew about community-owned businesses and how to access support
- 12 said they did not know about community-owned businesses and how to access support – interestingly 7 of these also indicated they did know about ACVs, so there appears to be a disconnect in the knowledge (*i.e. why would you list an ACV if you aren't aware of the opportunity for community ownership longer term?*)

It is positive that there appears to be an awareness of ACVs in the district, however it would appear that more work could be done to make the registration process clearer and easier to access. Related to this it would appear that there could be benefits in promoting how the community-ownership model could work and what support exists within the district for any groups want to look at bring assets in to community control.

West Oxfordshire Business insight:

The White House pub in Bladon¹⁷ became a community-owned business in 2020, having successfully utilised a Community Right to Bid on the asset when it was placed on the market for sale. Having registered the asset with West Oxfordshire District Council it afforded the community a period of up to 6 months to raise the required funds to purchase the pub, something they achieved thanks to a blended mix of finances. Most significantly was the 467 community shares investors who raised £359,800 towards the purchase (and refurbishment) costs. The shares were matched with grants and loans, as well as local support from Blenheim Palace.

The reason community-owned businesses utilise community-shares as a form of investment to support their ambitions is because it builds a membership, with invested interests in how the business will operate longer term. Furthermore the majority of community-owned pubs have adopted a legal form called a Community Benefit Society, a form of cooperative that is based on democratic control.

The demonstrable track record of local groups raising significant amounts of funding, for community-led projects should be seen as positive by West Oxfordshire District Council. This form of finance could match any available UKSPF and REPF investments, or reduce the need for investment altogether (in some communities).

More information about community shares and appropriate legal structures for community-owned businesses can be found on the Plunkett Foundation website but this is a successful project that is already trading in West Oxfordshire, which other groups could learn from.

Summary of conversations held with infrastructure bodies

<p>Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OALC newsletters to all parish and town councils a potential route to promote any UKSPF support • Parish and town councils should be engaged in any training and outreach activity related to ACVs • Support for the potential use of community-led plans as a way of engaging the grassroots and develop evidence of support for rural services and South Oxfordshire District Council are currently supporting South Moreton parish with funding, to produce a community-led / parish plan • Parish and town councils have the potential to access additional “match” funding through the precept and/or public works loans
<p>Community First Oxfordshire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CFO have access to a wider range of case studies and examples of community buildings hosting services which could be used in any communication activity • CFO advice for community buildings and village halls invaluable in relation to creating new “hosted” opportunities • Community buildings can access support from the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund¹⁸, which is managed by CFO’s national umbrella body ACRE • Previous parish and community-led plans in the county have been supported by CFO, advice and guidance materials also available from ACRE

¹⁷ [Our Story - Bladon Community Pub](#)

¹⁸ [Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund - ACRE](#)

<p>Oxfordshire Diocese</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a growing number of churches being used for services beyond religious ceremony, with one example hosting a “pop-up pub” • There is a commitment within the church network to environmental action, so community use of church buildings would need to contribute to this ambition • The diocese and the area Deans can provide access to advice and support to church groups looking at multiple uses of church buildings
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Summary of conversations with contacts at Oxfordshire County Council and West Oxfordshire District Council

<p>Planning - West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keen to see community voice being considered in the research being undertaking, understanding local needs from those with lived experience • Potentially beneficial to share the research with counterparts at Cotswold District Council, given the overlap on certain services and the linkages with transport network • Promoted the opportunity to discuss activity with transport and 20 minute neighbourhood colleagues at the county council • Opportunity to link in with the current Local Plan and also future emerging plan document. There is a policy included to protect rural services, as part of any community consultation there could be a review of how effective the policy has been and seek recommendations to strengthen the policy in future
<p>Transport – Oxfordshire County Council (OCC)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community transport (CT) is thriving in West Oxfordshire, operating alongside the main local plan to connect up services and locations • There is potential funding available for new CT schemes, with guidance available in the Oxfordshire County Council CT handbook • The reality is that there are fewer people travelling by bus than there was pre-Covid, so incentivising journeys through direct links with services (promotions) could be beneficial • There may be opportunities to link in with the Tourism sector to bring in further funding to support the local transport network
<p>20 Minute Neighbourhoods – OCC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very interested in interrogating the data collated as part of this research, so that it can be added to the 20 minute neighbourhood dashboards • If there is an interest in progressing “community-led plans” or asset mapping, the team can provide model questions that have been deployed in South and Vale district • The team would be interested in being engaged with the onward roll out of UKSPF and REPF in the district, to promote the opportunities created through 20 minute neighbourhoods
<p>The Climate Team at WODC (submitted via email)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing facilities in rural areas can reduce transport emissions, in relation to the roll of support via UKSPF and REPF there could be benefit in completing a carbon impact assessment

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other forms of information that could be beneficial to consider ahead of deploying support is the Project LEO mapping.¹⁹ This contains district wide data on building energy performance and the cost of energy efficiency measures • There are plans to set up a Climate Action Network for parishes and towns, and this could be widened to include solutions for improving rural accessibility. Furthermore, the quarterly newsletters issued by the climate team could be used to promote UKSPF and REPF support
Community Wellbeing Team - WODC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would be keen to see how the recommendations can contribute to the already locally supported approach of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) • Soft infrastructure (services) should be seen as important as physical assets • Make reference to the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Partnership²⁰ in relation to the recommendations • Use the recently published WODC Youth Needs Assessment in support of any ongoing community engagement activity.

Conclusions

Through engaging with local residents, the Council is likely to reach and address more at risk and vulnerable rural services and assets. The promotion of community-led planning has come in recognition that the process for creating a Neighbourhood Development Plan is a long-process and does not necessarily address the specific vulnerabilities of individual operators. Through supporting shorter community consultations, in order to create locally specific action plans the Council will have access to the most up to date community insights related to rural service provision. The process will also help to identify individual residents who are vulnerable and who could be supported by service providers.

Referencing the Community Wellbeing Index scores in relation to decisions made on UKSPF and REPF awards, will help the Council to prioritise projects which address inequalities or poorer access to health and wellbeing opportunities within West Oxfordshire. The CWI data should be considered alongside other research referenced in this report to help the council to support carbon reduction activity, as well as targeting support to those communities most in need.

There is a plethora of local organisations offering advice and support as well as existing community projects; from transport, to pubs and shops in West Oxfordshire. These organisations should be engaged in the next phase of work related to UKSPF and REPF and their experience used by the Council to influence future investment plans.

This research should be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue around rural service and facilities provision in West Oxfordshire. The enduring nature of the cost of living and energy price crises will continue to place pressures on operators for the foreseeable future. UKSPF and REPF support will go some way to supporting the current network of community assets, however the Council should take a longer term view in terms of ongoing support needs that will go beyond this funding. Working with communities to support local services and

¹⁹ [Mapping Oxfordshire's energy transition - Project LEO \(project-leo.co.uk\)](http://project-leo.co.uk)

²⁰ [Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & Berkshire West Integrated Care Partnership | http://yourvoicebob-icb.uk.engagementhq.com](http://yourvoicebob-icb.uk.engagementhq.com)

engaging them in the conversation about protecting them for future generations featured as a clear priority for many stakeholders engaged in this study.

Recommendations for West Oxfordshire District Council

The availability of UKSPF and REPF monies provides a huge opportunity for the council to invest in the current service provision in the district and take proactive steps to support the network of businesses, VCSE organisations and other community institutions at a time when they are facing multiple pressures. The following recommendations are meant to be advisory and for the consideration of the council in respect of the follow on actions that could be taken as a result of this research project.

- **Community outreach activity:**
 - West Oxfordshire District Council should **actively promote community-led or parish plans** as a way of encouraging residents to engage in a dialogue about rural facilities and services. If possible, the council could also provide small scale revenue funding for community groups, or parish councils to support the development of the plans would be beneficial. The action plans created, following community consultation would provide evidence of need or support for any UKSPF or REPF grant distributed.
 - There should be an **awareness raising campaign related to the “Community Right to Bid” and ACV registration**. This could benefit those communities in the district unaware of the legislation. For those areas that are already engaged in with the legislation they could be supported in having proactive conversations about how community-ownership models can support the provision of local services. This work should involve ward councillors, as well as engaging the parish and town council network.
 - Running a programme of **training for parish and town councils**, parish meetings and ward councillors in respect of rural service provision could be a useful way of reaching grassroots businesses sooner – particularly those that are vulnerable. The intention of the training would be to inform the attendees about UKSPF and REPF and to give them confidence in respect of helping to connect business operators with appropriate advice and support available.
 - West Oxfordshire District Council should use the newsletters and communication networks utilised by town and parish councils for promoting UKSPF and REPF support, as they will have a significant reach in the district
 - As part of the roll out of any UKSPF and REPF support, the council should look **to incentivise the use of community buildings and churches as “host” facilities, to create more multi-service hubs**. For example, this could be through using REPF funding to upgrade internet facilities, or electricity supply to make the building suitable for a service provider to operate from. Funding could also be utilised to support capital costs such as purchasing new equipment to run specific events which provide access to services – for example, community market places or cafes.
- **Provision of funding and support:**
 - Offer UKSPF and REPF **grant funding for community-run/community-owned businesses**, representatives of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sectors. The impacts of the cost of living and energy price crises

- are being felt across all sectors and UKSPF and REPF funding could be used on retro-fit, energy efficient actions to sustain a range of businesses.
- Using UKSPF funding **create a programme of advice and support for rural businesses, focusing on energy efficiency and robust financial management**. Privately run businesses should be eligible to access any advisory support services available.
 - West Oxfordshire District Council should **work with the local infrastructure support bodies**, to make sure that they have the capacity and skills to support the rural economy in West Oxfordshire, through the provision of advice and support.
 - The council should engage with Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in respect of the delivery of UKSPF and REPF funds to ensure that multi-sector small business operators are aware of any support made available.
- **Promotion of “match” and other forms of finance:**
 - In some communities, the precept raising powers of parish and town councils, could offer a potential source of finance to match and UKSPF or REPF investments and/or to support specific community-led action and service projects. Furthermore the potential for councils to access Public Works Loan Finance further emphasises the importance to engage with parish and town councils in relation to asset and service protection within the district. Community consultation and evidence of support and need will be critical to influence and work with individual councils.
 - **The UK Government Community Ownership Fund** provides an opportunity for groups looking to bring assets in to community-ownership. Providing large scale grants it could be a significant source of finance for groups in the district. Plunkett is an official provider of support for the COF, this could be promoted alongside any local UKSPF and REPF activity

Appendix (additional excel document):

- West Oxfordshire Services Matrix
- Parish / Town Council and community buildings survey responses
- ACV and Neighbourhood Plan reviews
- Car ownership statistics
- Coop Foundation Community Wellbeing profiles

Useful resources and other relevant information:

- My Community - [What is the Community Ownership Fund - MyCommunity](#)
- The Good Councillors Guide to Community Business - [The-good-councillors-guide-to-community-business.pdf \(plunkett.co.uk\)](#)
- Community Transport guidance and funding - [Community transport | Oxfordshire County Council](#)
- Keep it in the Community, the national ACV platform - [Keep it in the Community Homepage \(site.com\)](#)
- CPRE Research: Transport Deserts 2020 [Nearly a million stranded in ‘transport deserts’ as rural travel links cut - CPRE](#)

Rural facilities and services in West Oxfordshire

Report produced by the
Plunkett Foundation



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