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WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Council

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB
at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 27 November 2024**

PRESENT

Councillors: Elizabeth Poskitt (Chair), Andrew Coles (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Lidia Arciszewska, Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, Mike Baggaley, Andrew Beaney, Adam Clements, Julian Cooper, Steve Cosier, Rachel Crouch, Jane Doughty, Genny Early, Duncan Enright, Roger Faulkner, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Andrew Prosser, Nigel Ridpath, Carl Rylett, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Tim Sumner, Sarah Veasey, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Adrian Walsh, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive Officer), Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Christine Elsasser (Interim Democratic Services Officer), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer), Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant) and Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

CL.194 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Michael Brooker, David Cooper, Natalie King, Charlie Maynard, and Martin McBride.

Councillor Michele Mead left the meeting at the end of item 13.

Councillor Julian Cooper left the meeting at the end of item 13.

CL.195 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made by members of the Council.

The Chair advised that in relation to Item 16 on the agenda, there was an exempt report relating to the salaries and terms and conditions of the Council's Chief Officers. Those Officers would leave the room for the duration of that item.

CL.196 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Chair requested a minor amendment relating to the Chair's Reception held at Woodgreen.

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, proposed that the minutes of the previous meeting of Council, held on Wednesday 25 September 2024, be agreed by Council as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chair of the Council subject to the minor amendment. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright and was put to a vote.

There were 42 votes for, 0 votes against and 2 abstentions. The vote was carried.

Council resolved to:

- I. Agree the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 25 September 2024 as a true and accurate record.

CL.197 Receipt of Announcements

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, the Chair of the Council, welcomed Members and Officers to the meeting. The Chair gave an update of their engagements since the last meeting of Council in September 2024 and also announced the following upcoming events:

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- There would be an event in aid of the Mayor's charities on 31 January 2025 at Woodstock Town Hall and more information would follow.
- Thanks were given to those who had bought cake and jam with the proceeds being donated to charity.
- There was a Christmas staff event on the morning of 16 December at 10am -11am in the Committee Rooms downstairs at the Woodgreen Council Offices.
- Congratulations were given to the newly elected Councillor Mike Baggaley for Chipping Norton.

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader announced the following:

- Various work was being carried out in regard to the winter fuel payment uplift program which was using data to target people at risk of crisis. The Council had communicated to residents about the support available, encouraging people to sign up to pension credit. The Executive Member for Stronger Healthy Communities would continue to work on this.
- The Council had received Innovation Funding to increase participation and digital consultation for complex planning consultations. Officers were thanked for their work on the project. Members would be trained on how to use the platform.
- The West Oxfordshire District Council Voice had been circulated at a cost of 60 pence per copy. After a request from Councillor Ashby, The Leader confirmed he would ensure that the communications team would circulate electronic copies to Councillors and Town and Parish Councils.
- The flooding impact was far worse than forecast by Environment Agency (EA) and the Met Office. The Council's teams had responded to the situation quickly, carrying out door knocking on Monday evening. Officers at Ubico, within the flood management and emergency management teams, were thanked for their work.
- The Chair added her sympathies to those who would be out of their homes due to the flooding.
- In response to a query from a member, the Leader confirmed that it was an immediate priority to check sandbag stocks.

Councillor Duncan Enright, the Deputy Leader, announced the following:

- Further sympathy was expressed to those impacted by the floods. There was a whole series of events and markets across the district. Woodstock Festival, Witney and Carterton Christmas Lights switch on and the Chipping Norton gift market was on 8 December. The Christmas market at Marriott's walk was on from 5-8 December and would be larger than last year. Events were on Cotswold.com. The Deputy Leader wished everyone a Happy Christmas.

Councillor Andrew Prosser thanked staff for dealing with floods and Councillor Booker and colleagues within the fire department. He said that Miller's Mews had also flooded but was grateful for the support received. There would be a route map published soon.

Councillor Geoff Saul stated that there were two bids on behalf of the Community Partnership that had been successful. Monday would see the start of 16 days of activism project against gender-based violence and a domestic abuse was taking place in Chipping Norton on the 16 December.

Councillor Hugo Ashton explained that Botley West Solar Farm application had been submitted on 15 November. The Inspector had 28 days to validate the application. A local impact report was being prepared and would be presented to Development Control

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Committee in February and there would need to be relevant representations prepared by the Council.

Councillor Lidia Arciszewska explained that the Witney flood monitoring system was up and running. She expressed thanks to the Witney Flood Group for setting it up and the project was conceived at Waterways Day in 2022 and could prevent and manage flooding in the future.

Giles Hughes, the Chief Executive, welcomed the staff who transferred from Publica on 1 November 2024 and highlighted the names and roles of the senior staff to have transferred. The Chief Executive welcomed Ana Prelici as the Senior Democratic Services Officers who had joined on Monday.

Madhu Richards, the Director of Finance, said that the budget consultation had opened on 18 November and would run until 15 December.

Councillor Julian Cooper announced that it was the 150th birthday of Sir Winston Churchill.

CL.198 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation at the meeting.

CL.199 Questions by Members

Questions by Members, as listed on the agenda, and the responses to those questions, which were circulated in advance, were taken as read.

The Chair invited the questioners to ask a supplementary question if they wished and then invited the relevant Executive Members to respond.

The Written Questions, Written Answers, Verbal Supplementary Questions and Verbal Supplementary Answers are detailed in a separate document appended to the Minutes of the Meeting.

CL.200 Recommendations from the Executive

Councillor Andy Graham, The Leader of the Council, referred to Councillor Smith, Executive Member for Finance, to present the recommendation.

Councillor Smith explained that the recommendation was to introduce 100% Council Tax premiums on second homes from 1 April 2025 to levy the maximum level of premium for Empty Homes as set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 with graduated premiums for long term empty properties up to a 300% premium for properties empty for 10 years or more. This would incentivise owners to bring properties in to use and would also be a revenue stream to help to provide for local services.

In response to a question it was clarified that legislation determined the charge on substantially unfurnished properties and advice needed to be taken on what the maximum charge for the levy was under legislation. Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council approve the recommendations 1-4.

This was seconded by Councillor Alaric Smith was put to a vote, and was there were 42 votes for, 1 against and 1 abstention. The vote was carried.

Council Resolved to:

- I. Agree from 01 April 2025 to levy the maximum level of premium for Empty Homes as set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023:
 - i. Premium of 100% for dwellings which are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished (Empty Homes Premium) after 1 year up to 5 years of becoming empty;
 - ii. Premium of 200% for dwellings which are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished (Empty Homes Premium) between 5 years and 10 years;

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- iii. Premium of 300% for dwellings which are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished (Empty Homes Premium) for 10 years or more.
2. Agree from 1 April 2025 to the implementation of a premium (Second Homes Premium) of 100% for dwellings that are no one's sole or main residence and which are substantially furnished.
3. Note that where premiums are to be applied, the Council is mindful of the outcome of the government consultation which recommends exceptions in certain circumstances outlined within the report may be amended, and as such guidance may change.
4. Agree that any amendments to the guidance which may change the criteria for Premiums be delegated to the Chief Finance Officer in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance.

CL.201 Gambling Act 2005 Statement of Principles (Policy) Review 2024

Cllr David Jackson, Vice-Chair of the Licensing Committee, introduced the report that detailed the proposed revisions to the Council's Statement of Principles (Gambling Act 2005), based on legislative requirements, statutory guidance and any amendments following public consultation.

Section 349 of the Gambling Act 2005 (the "Act") required the licensing authorities before each successive period of three years to:

- a) Prepare a statement of the principles that they propose to apply in exercising their functions under this Act during that period, and;
- b) Publish the statement.

The next "successive period" would start on 31 January 2025. However, the Statement needed to

be adopted by 31 December 2024 as it must be published at least 4 weeks before the date on which it comes into effect on the authority's website and also be available for inspection by the public.

Before determining its Policy, the Authority was required to consult with the police, persons who represent the interests of gambling businesses and those who represent the interests of persons who were likely to be affected by gambling businesses.

It was to be noted that there were no responses from consultees. The benefit of making a 'no casino' resolution meant that any applications for a casino in the West Oxfordshire District area would be determined by Full Council. If a 'no casino' resolution was not renewed, then if the operator had the necessary planning permission, it was likely that the application for a casino would automatically be granted.

Councillor David Jackson proposed that Council approve the recommendations.

This was seconded by Councillor Mark Walker, was put to a vote, and agreed unanimously.

Council resolved to:

1. Approve the Statement of Principles; and,
2. Agree that the Council continues to adopt a "no-casino resolution" for inclusions in the published Gambling Act 2005 Licensing Policy Statement

CL.202 Review of standards arrangements

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Councillor Carl Rylett, the Chair of the Audit Committee introduced the report, which considered the Council's Member Code of Conduct Complaint Handling Arrangements and the Standards Sub-Committee Procedure Rules following a review by Officers and the Council's Independent Persons.

There were a number of learnings taken from a complaint that progressed to the local hearing stage, which was the first hearing held since the incumbent Director of Governance joined the Council. The Council's complaint handling arrangements and the Standards Sub-Committee Procedure Rules were considered to have generally worked well but could be strengthened in certain respects, in particular around complaints brought by third parties. Officers, following receipt of external legal advice and in conjunction with three Independent Persons, had reviewed the documents and presented amended versions showing changes which were attached at Annex A and B respectively. The main substantive changes were listed in the cover report.

Councillors queried the report and were provided with the following answers:

- The changes in section 6.1 would be made and the error free version was being approved.
- The Monitoring Officer could reopen the matter if further changes to either document was considered necessary in future.
- Comments were made about the language being gender neutral and there was greater clarity around defining bullying and disrespect which provided more clarity for all.

Councillor Carl Rylett proposed that Council approve the recommendations. This was seconded by Councillor Ruth Smith was put to a vote, and it was agreed unanimously.

Council resolved to:

1. Adopt the revised Member Code of Conduct Complaint Handling Arrangements (Annex A2).
2. Adopt the revised Standards Sub-Committee Procedure Rules (Annex B2) following a review undertaken by officers and the three Independent Persons

CL.203 Review of political proportionalities

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council introduced the review of the political proportionalities on committees following receipt of a notice that a Member had joined a political group.

On Friday 15 November 2024 a notice was received by the Proper Officer confirming that Councillor Michael Baggaley had joined the Liberal Democrat Group on the Council and that a review of the political proportionalities on committees was requested. Councillor Baggaley was elected at the Chipping Norton by-election held on 14 November 2024. Annex A showed the proportionalities on committees with changes since the previous review of political proportionalities, at the 22 May 2024 Annual Meeting of Council given in brackets. The Liberal Democrat Group had gained one seat on the Development Control Committee and one seat on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, both from the Labour Group. The Labour Group had a vacant seat on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and had been asked to confirm which Member would come off the Development Control Committee.

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Where there were changes to be made to the membership of committees, the relevant group leaders were asked to announce the nominated Members at the meeting alternatively notify the Monitoring Officer

for appointment under delegated authority. If required, the Monitoring Officer would use their delegated authority to appoint to vacancies on committees in accordance with the wishes of political groups (Constitution Part 5A, rule 5.1.2). Such appointments would be reported to the next meeting of Council for noting and ratification.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council approve the recommendations.

This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and agreed unanimously.

Council resolved to:

1. Agree the political proportionalities as set out in Annex A.
2. Appoint Councillor Mike Baggaley to sit on the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Development Control Committee.

CL.204 Council Size Proposal (Phase I of the Electoral Review of West Oxfordshire District)

Councillor Alaric Smith, as Chair of the Constitution Working Group, introduced the report that considered the submission of a Council Size Proposal to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England as part of the electoral review of West Oxfordshire, and any associated change to the electoral cycle for the District Council and Town and Parish Councils within the West Oxfordshire district area.

The Chair of the Constitution Working Group explained the following points;

- There hadn't been an electoral review of the district since 2001.
- A review was now taking place and the outcomes would take effect from the local elections in 2027.
- The aim was to address electoral inequalities whereby some wards contain too many or too few electors per councillor, as a result of new developments and population movements over time.
- Phase I of the review was to consider the appropriate number of Councillors on the District Council.
- The Draft Council Size Proposal at Annex A had been overseen by the cross-party Constitution Working Group and sought an unchanged size of 49 Councillors.
- Having considered the issues and the results of the Member survey, the Working Group believed that 49 was the right number of Councillors for West Oxfordshire to ensure that the governance arrangements of the Council could continue to function and that communities across the District could be represented effectively. The size of 49 was supported by the vast majority of Members who completed the survey (and thanks was given to those of you who did so).
- The size of the Council would ultimately be a decision for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. The Council didn't have to submit a Council Size Proposal but the Working Group believed that it was in the Council's interests to do so to inform the Commission's decision.
- The Council also needed to consider whether it was wished to retain a mix of 1, 2 and 3 Member wards. If so, the Council would need to hold whole-Council elections every 4 years from 2027.

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- Any decision to change the electoral cycle could only be taken at a specially convened full Council meeting with a 2/3 majority in favour. This was the Working Group's recommended option.
- If it were to be decided to move to whole-Council elections then the Council would have the power to harmonise town and parish council elections with its own electoral cycle, should it wish to do so.
- The alternative was to retain elections by thirds. This would require the Council to have a uniform pattern of 3-Member wards across the whole district. This would result in some extremely large 3-Member wards which would be challenging to represent effectively. The size of the Council would also need to be divisible by 3 (i.e. 48 or 51 Members but not 49).
- Phase 2 of the review would involve consultation on ward boundaries once the Council size had been determined, and this phase would follow the County Council elections in May 2025.
- The Working Group's conclusions were reflected in the recommendations which were to;
 - Approve the Draft Council Size Proposal at Annex A with a delegation for minor amendments and improvements.
 - Note that in any event there will be whole-Council elections on new boundaries in 2027, meaning the members elected in 2026 will serve a 1 year term.
 - Agree in principle to move to whole-Council elections and agree to hold a special meeting of full Council on 29 January (after the ordinary full Council meeting) to take a formal decision to change the electoral cycle.
 - Authorise the Chief Executive to consult with town and parish councils on the option of harmonising their electoral cycles with our own electoral cycle if we move to whole-Council elections every four years from 2027.

Councillors made the following comments:

- It was a nuanced decision. A four-year term would give administrations time to take medium term decisions and help to mitigate against short-term decision making. It also provided for stability for 3 years but then the instability of whole-Council elections. Therefore it was felt that all out elections were probably preferable in terms of what it delivers for residents.
- Neither option was ideal and there were concerns about continuity of governance.
- There were concerns about grouping 1 and 2-Member wards together resulting in huge rural areas covering lots of parish councils. As such the option of thirds would be practically very difficult.
- Going forwards the benefits of 1, 2 and 3-Member wards was worth retaining, based on real evidence and experience of what works. There were pros and cons for all options; however costs would be lower with whole-Council elections. It was important to consult town and parish councils on their electoral cycles.
- Proportional Representation was not available to local authorities at present.
- If the Council decided not to move to whole-Council elections it would need to revisit Council Size Proposal.
- The Chair reminded Members that a 2/3 majority was required at the convened special meeting of full Council on 29 January 2025 to change the electoral cycle.

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It was suggested and agreed by the proposer and seconder that the extraordinary meeting on 29 January 2025 be held on the rising of the ordinary meeting of full Council, rather than 4.00pm as proposed in the report.

Councillor Alaric Smith proposed that Council approve the recommendations.

This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham was put to a vote, and it was unanimous.

Council resolved to:

1. Approve the Draft Council Size Proposal (Annex A) for submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.
2. Delegate authority to the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services, in consultation with the Chair of the Constitution.
3. Working Group, to make any minor amendments required to finalise the document to reflect the discussion at full Council, correct typographical errors or otherwise strengthen and improve the proposal document.
4. Note that whole-Council elections will be held on new ward boundaries in May 2027 in any scenario.
5. Agree in principle to move to whole-Council elections every four years from May 2027.
6. Agree to convene a special meeting of full Council on 29 January 2025 for the purpose of formally deciding whether to change the electoral cycle to whole-Council elections every four years from May 2027 (which will require a 2/3 majority at the specially convened meeting).
7. Authorise the Chief Executive Officer to seek the views of town and parish councils on whether to harmonise ordinary elections of all town and parish councils within the district area with district council elections from May 2027, in the event that the District Council does decide to move to whole-Council elections from May 2027.

CL.205 Polling District and Places Review

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, introduced the report that updated Members on the review of the Parliamentary Polling Districts and Polling Places within West Oxfordshire, following the public consultation which was in place from 24 September to 4 November 2024.

A review of parliamentary polling districts and polling places within the West Oxfordshire District Council area had been undertaken. The process had involved inviting representations from such persons thought to have particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons with varying disabilities. Representations were also sought from political parties within the district, the various political groups on the Council and from Town & Parish Councils and Parish Meetings. The representations had been considered by the Constitution Working Group which had endorsed the recommended changes arising from the review which are set out in Annex A and summarised in section 3 of the report.

It was explained that the new County Council division changes resulted in 3 new polling districts within Witney. Members wished to thank the Electoral Services Manager and her team and the following points by Members were to be noted:

- The next review would be undertaken before too long and the remaining issues could be sorted within that time.

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- In some places there were awkward arrangements i.e. in Curbridge parish with housing developments on the other side of A40.
- Polling district JD2 was split and it was a long walk to Davenport Road. Polling Stations should be in heart of communities.
- Regarding Shilton Old School, another polling district could be established in Bradwell Grove.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council approve the recommendations.

This was seconded by Councillor Alaric Smith, was put to a vote, and there were 43 votes in favour and 1 abstention. The vote was carried.

Council resolved to:

1. Note the consultation feedback as set out in Annex A.
2. Approve the recommended changes to polling districts and polling places as set out in Annex A.
3. Approve the full schedule of polling districts and polling places set out in Annex B.
4. Note that the Council will undertake a further review of polling districts and polling places following the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's electoral review of West Oxfordshire District Council.

CL.206 Results of Member Survey on Meeting Start Times

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, introduced the report that presented the results of the Member Survey on Council start times which Council agreed to undertake following a trial of a 4.00pm start time for the 25 September full Council meeting.

Full Council meetings presently started at 2.00pm.

The results of the survey were set out in Annex A and Annex B. Of the 31 Members who responded, 13 (42%) favoured retaining a 2.00pm start time, 12 (39%) favoured moving to 4.00pm and 6 (19%) were unsure.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council approve the recommendation to note the report. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright.

Councillor Thomas Ashby proposed that Council change the start time of meetings to 4.00pm. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Liam Walker. The proposal was put to a vote, and there were 19 votes in favour, 20 votes against and 5 abstentions. The vote was not carried.

Council resolved to:

1. Note the report.

CL.207 Motion A: Suicide Prevention (Proposer: Cllr Alex Wilson, Cllr Michele Mead)

Councillor Alex Wilson introduced the motion that was set out as follows:

We as a Council could and should be calling for further support for those who struggle with their mental health and the thoughts that may come from this. The motion was a further step forward in the correct direction in supporting the many people who struggle and to assist our officers and Mental Health Champion, once chosen, to increase the support available.

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Councillor Alex Wilson proposed the motion and Councillor Liam Walker seconded the motion.

Councillor Steve Cosier explained that he felt there was moral case for supporting mental health and early help. Preservation and support of strategy goes beyond party politics. He wanted positive advocates for mental health and proposed an amendment. Councillor Stuart McCarroll seconded the amendment as he felt it would improve the motion.

Councillor Wilson accepted the amendment and Members thanked Councillor Wilson for his motion and his work around it. A Member suggested writing to the MP Layla Moran.

The motion was put to a vote, and it was agreed unanimously.

The Council resolved to:

1. Join the Zero Suicide Alliance network.
2. Promote existing safeguarding and suicide prevention training and resources to all council workers and signpost to the council's wellbeing pages and Mental Health First Aiders.
3. Include appropriate signposting to suicide prevention and/or mental health support in cost-of-living material, on the online community hub, and in arrears letters.
4. For the Council Leader to write to local MPs informing them of the situation and calling for them to lobby for the increased awareness and for an increase in support of the national suicide prevention strategy put forward under the Conservative Government in September 2023
5. Positive advocates to be provided for mental health.

CL.208 Matters exempt from publication

The press and public were excluded from the meeting during its consideration of item 16. A resolution was passed in accordance with the provisions of Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 specifying the grounds on which their presence could involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1 and 3 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

CL.209 Salaries and Terms and Conditions of Chief Officers

The purpose of the item was to consider the salary for the Chief Executive Officer, Director of Finance and Director of Governance and Regulatory Services, to ensure that additional duties and Line Management responsibilities are reflected in salary and that salaries are consistent with that of the newly recruited Director of Place.

Initial agreement had been sought from the Leader and a recommendation was passed by Performance and Appointments Committee (13.11.24).

In addition, as per the WODC Constitution to move the Chief Executive. and Directors to the terms and conditions of Joint National Committee (JNC), from National Joint Council (NJC) which was also recommended to Council by the Performance and Appointments Committee (13.11.24).

The Members discussed the item, it was put to a vote and the recommendations were agreed.

The Council resolved to:

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- I. Approve the appropriate salary for the post of Chief Executive Officer, Director of Finance, and Director of Governance effective from 1 November 2024 and the movement to Joint National Committee (JNC) Terms and Conditions.

The Meeting closed at 4.02 pm

CHAIR

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Members Questions & Responses for Council – 27 November 2024

Question	Raised By	Executive Member	Response
Question 1 – How many bookings have you received to hire the Chamber?	Councillor Michele Mead – Conservative, Councillor	Councillor Andy Graham – Leader of the Council	<p>The Council Chamber / Community Space has been used to host a number of meetings and events, such as the West Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Alliance that was attended by representatives from the ICB, OCC and local support organisations from across our district.</p> <p>The Council has now agreed a formal pricing mechanism or scale of charges for the renting out of both the Council Chamber / Committee Rooms along with a process to make bookings.</p> <p>The Communication Team have developed an appropriate marketing strategy, and the Communities Team are making their network aware of the new arrangements and costs (which does include a discount for local charities and communities).</p> <p>This has also been shared with Hexagon a commercial operator who are very interested in renting the Council Chamber / Community Space to host events and a meeting is being scheduled to progress this.</p>
Supplementary question – How much are you towards the £150,000 target of income for the Chamber?	Councillor Michele Mead – Conservative, Councillor, Carterton South	Councillor Andy Graham – Leader of the Council	<p>We have bought forward the scale of charges, which have only just been launched. It is hardly likely we'll be reaching any target and will provide a written response.</p> <p><u>Written response</u></p>

			<p>The figure of £150,000 has been taken from a press release (Oxford Mail - 4th February 2024) in which the Leader stated that the “ ... works on the council chamber facility are a key part of a wider project to make better use of council buildings, which we expect will bring in up to £150,000 per year to the Council to help fund local services”.</p> <p>The figure was not a target for income from the Council Chamber alone and includes other properties which were part of the Agile Working Project such as Elmfield.</p> <p>Elmfield income is included in the 2025/26 budget and an estimate for the Council Chamber income will be included in 2026/27 budget as the scale of charges were only brought forward in December 2024.</p>
<p>Question 2 – As yet another shop closes in Marriotts walk please can we have an update on what the Executive are doing to fill these empty units?</p>	<p>Councillor Michele Mead – Conservative, Carterton South</p>	<p>Councillor Duncan Enright – Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Economic Development</p>	<p>A dedicated team, comprised of the Assets team, the Economic Development Team along with letting agents, managing agents and retail consultants meet regularly to ensure sustained momentum in filling empty units and driving initiatives that support the vitality of Marriotts Walk. Progress updates are shared with Senior Management and Executive Members.</p> <p>We are actively engaging with prospective tenants to attract businesses that align with the needs and aspirations of Marriotts. Recent efforts have led to short term lettings for the Calendar Club and we are in advanced discussions with an operator in respect of the former Frankie and Benny’s</p>

			<p>unit. We have leases in legal for Units 8 and 9, Unit 4, Unit 11B and Unit 15 securing current and new tenants.</p> <p>Encouragingly, footfall has seen a slight increase, with Marks & Spencer reporting significant profits—a positive indicator of overall high street performance. This improvement underscores the potential of Marriotts Walk as a retail and leisure destination and reaffirms our commitment to reinvigorating the space. Moreover, we are leveraging public realm improvements funded by S106 contributions to enhance the overall appeal and functionality of the area. This work is designed to make Marriotts Walk an even more attractive destination for businesses and shoppers alike.</p> <p>Our recent Vegan Fair brought increased footfall and added a vibrant atmosphere for our regular Saturday shoppers. Soon, the Christmas Market will arrive, offering a delightful selection of handcrafted gifts, local treats, and artisan goods. Looking ahead to Spring 2025, a new commercial market operator will bring more regular markets to the public realm, hosting seasonal, artisan, and food fairs. These events aim to foster community engagement, enhance the sense of place, and attract more visitors to support the businesses at Marriotts Walk.</p>
Supplementary question – How are we monitoring the foot fall in Marriotts Walk?	Councillor Michele Mead – Conservative, Carterton South	Councillor Duncan Enright – Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Economic Development	<p>I don't know the exact mechanics but the management team there count foot fall by automated systems and cameras across the estate. The same monitoring system across the town centre and we are working through the town partnership. We are monitoring activity across the whole of the town centre so we can measure improvements as we make them. Woolgate does a similar job and by sharing this data we can get a true</p>

			picture of the health of Witney town. Good news our town is looking really healthy.
Question 3 – What are the latest developments in the Council's work towards becoming a Local Authority of Sanctuary and what are the Council's next steps on this?	Councillor Ruth Smith – Labour and Co-operative, Witney East	Councillor Rachel Crouch – Executive Member for Stronger Healthy Communities	<p>Following the Council Motion, Officers have met with their peers in both Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council to learn from their experiences as they are ahead of us in regards applying to become a Council of Sanctuary. A regular meeting to continue learning from each other has also been set up.</p> <p>Officers have also met with Maggie Filipova-Rivers who is City of Sanctuary Local Authority Lead and Dr Hari Reed who is the Policy and Advocacy Coordinator at Asylum Welcome to discuss the actual application process and the steps involved.</p> <p>The Council has now formally joined the City of Sanctuary Local Authority network, which is an expected part of the process and have started to review case studies from organisation that have successfully been awarded Council of Sanctuary status to gain a better understanding of the application process.</p> <p>Nominations have now been received from all the Group Leaders and a Steering Group has been established, comprising of Cllrs Cosier, Doughty and Prosser that will be chaired by Cllr Crouch and supported by Officers. The first meeting of the Group is scheduled for 27 November.</p> <p>To help the Council complete the needs assessment/service gap analysis, that is part of the application process, we are linking in with an independent</p>

			piece of research that is being currently being carried out across the county, that is being accredited by Oxford Brookes University.
Supplementary question – Just want to ask of an indication of time scale for the first parts of the process acknowledging it's a very ongoing commitment.	Councillor Ruth Smith – Labour and Co-operative, Witney East	Councillor Rachel Crouch – Executive Member for Stronger Healthy Communities	The motion was put in place in July and we are hoping to be completed by August 2025.
Question 4 – Please could you confirm when a mental health champion will be in position?	Councillor Alex Wilson – Conservative, Kingham Rollright and Enstone.	Councillor Andy Graham – Leader of the Council	Heather McCulloch is the Council's Officer Mental Health Champion Councillor Rachel Crouch – Executive Member for Stronger Healthy Communities is the Council's Mental Health Champion
Supplementary question – Now that the mental health champion is in place, will there be a meeting between leaders to discuss the expectations of the mental health champion and confirm what that will be?	Councillor Alex Wilson – Conservative, Kingham Rollright and Enstone	Councillor Andy Graham – Leader of the Council	Thank you for the congratulations on the speed of the mental health champion that was put in place. Two health champions have been agreed for staff; Heather McCulloch and Cllr Rachel Crouch who has taken on Stronger Healthier Communities. The rational behind not taking on anyone else is because we have a really good fit. They meet on a regular basis and the issue of mental health is on the agenda every time they meet. The important thing about champions is we make it work and only for that reason.

			After that response Cllr Rachel Crouch commented that she had been in communication with Witney Town Football Club about Tough to Talk – work on suicide.
Question 5 – How many homeless people is the Council aware of in West Oxfordshire and more specifically Witney?	Councillor Jane Doughty – Conservative, Witney West	Councillor Geoff Saul – Executive Member for Housing and Social Care	<p>The Housing Team are currently working with around 100 households who have been placed in some form of Temporary Accommodation under a homelessness duty. The Team is also working with around another 100 households who are in some form of housing crisis to prevent homelessness from occurring.</p> <p>As at 18 November 2024 West Oxfordshire has one confirmed rough sleeper in the Witney area who has so far refused all offers of accommodation. The Housing Team continue to work closely with our Outreach provider in ensuring that welfare checks are carried out and accommodation options discussed. Housing have also received reports of a further two suspected rough sleepers in the Chipping Norton area today (18 November) but this has not yet been verified.</p> <p>Anyone worried about a rough sleeper should report this through the following website: https://thestreetlink.org.uk/ giving the location and description of the person or contact the Housing Team at: housing@westoxon.gov.uk</p>
Question 6 – Following on from that when was the last time the Council’s Housing Policy in relation to homeless people reviewed and how frequently is this done?	Councillor Jane Doughty – Conservative, Witney West	Councillor Geoff Saul – Executive Member for Housing and Social Care.	<p>Local Authorities have a duty to publish a new homelessness strategy every 5 years. West Oxfordshire DC has signed up to the Countywide Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026:</p> <p>https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s57561/CA_OCT1921R09%20-%20Annex%201%20-%20Oxfordshires%20and%20homelessness%20sleeping%20strategy%202021-2026.pdf</p> <p>This Strategy is reviewed quarterly and annually by all Local Authority and County Council partners. West Oxfordshire DC also has an independent</p>

			Prevention of Homelessness Strategy, and this has been reviewed during 2024. However, the delivery of the aims of the strategy is closely linked to the announcement of the Homelessness Prevention Grant Funding for 2025 – 2027. This announcement is due in December 2024 therefore the new Preventing Homelessness Strategy draft is scheduled to be available in January/February 2025.
Supplementary question – Can the homeless strategy be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee?	Councillor Jane Doughty – Conservative, Witney West	Councillor Geoff Saul – Executive Member for Housing and Social Care.	It is not for me to set the Overview and Scrutiny agenda however various homeless/housing issues are coming to Overview and Scrutiny in January, and there will be opportunities to raise your issue there.
Question 7 – Given that West Oxfordshire District Council is recording a deficit in regard to Green Waste, will the Executive Member consider reducing the Green Waste Fee from the current £50 ahead of the 25/26 budget?	Councillor Thomas Ashby - Conservative, Witney West	Councillor Lidia Arciszewska – Executive Member for Environment.	<p>The garden waste service is very popular with residents, this year 32,457 licenses have been sold.</p> <p>This year the service has resulted in revenue of £1,622,850, compared to £1,483,425 last year.</p> <p>The current licence fee of £50 is the 2nd lowest in Oxfordshire, providing good value for money at just £2.17 per collection.</p> <p>The garden waste license fee is based on cost of delivering the service, from the initial purchase of the license to the emptying of bin. The same methodology will be used to set the fee in 2025/26.</p>
Supplementary question – What are you going to do to increase the licenses we sell?	Councillor Thomas Ashby - Conservative,	Councillor Lidia Arciszewska – Executive	This is a popular service with residents and the revenue has to cover our costs. The fact that we have fewer licenses reflects many difference reasons one being the cost of living crisis. We don't have any deficit.

	Witney West	Member for Environment.	
<p>Question 8 -There have been a number of complaints regarding trees. There have been many claims of subsidence over the past few years within my ward, therefore there is a real need for the Tree Management Policy to be reviewed urgently.</p> <p>Not only are there cases of subsidence, but many elderly residents are unable to afford Tree Surgeons to maintain Council owned shrubs, bushes and trees that are affecting their homes. Please can the Executive Member start the review on the Tree Management Policy in January 2025, as this is a Policy which is now out of date.</p>	Councillor Thomas Ashby - Conservative, Witney West	Councillor Lidia Arciszewska – Executive Member for Environment.	As indicated at the last Council meeting in September, a review of the Tree Management Policy adopted in 2019 will be conducted early in 2025. The intention is to increase the scope and responsibilities of the (currently vacant) Tree Officer post within Planning Services to include practical works to Council trees as well as Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) and Tree Conservation Area (TCA) applications. It is anticipated that, once appointed, the Tree Officer will also be able to review or input into a review of the Tree Management Policy.

<p>Supplementary question – The tree management policy affects lots of members and wards can a working group be set up to look at this policy?</p>	<p>Councillor Thomas Ashby - Conservative, Witney West</p>	<p>Councillor Lidia Arciszewska – Executive Member for Environment.</p>	<p>This policy was set up by the previous administration late in 2019 we will review as early as next year.</p>
<p>Question 9 - How many fly-tipping incidents have been reported? How many that have been reported have had action taken against them?</p> <p>Please can the Executive Member review the Policy to ensure that all housing estates are covered by this policy?</p>	<p>Councillor Thomas Ashby - Conservative, Witney West</p>	<p>Councillor Lidia Arciszewska – Executive Member for Environment.</p>	<p>A total of 753 incidents of fly-tipping have been reported this year, 54 of these are duplicate cases.</p> <p>As a result, 130 site visits have been conducted by officers, of those visits 65 further investigations have been opened with 22 resulting in FPNs already being issued and a further 5 which will be issued shortly. In addition, 22 investigations are still ongoing. I believe this demonstrates a robust approach to environmental crime in West Oxfordshire and I would like to put on record my thanks to the officers who undertake this work and the Ubico crews who clear up the waste.</p> <p>Currently several covert cameras are deployed in fly-tipping hotspots in the district with a further 8 locations identified for future operations. Signage is placed in these locations warning that CCTV is being used, this has almost halted the number of incidents.</p> <p>The current policy covers environmental crime on land in public ownership. Incidents that occur on privately owned land are the responsibility of the landowner/tenant and there are no plans to review this.</p>
<p>Supplementary question – Thousands of Council tax papers are not receiving the service of fly tipping as they</p>	<p>Councillor Thomas Ashby - Conservative, Witney West</p>	<p>Councillor Lidia Arciszewska – Executive</p>	<p>The responsibility for fly tipping on private housing developments belongs to the owners and there are management companies responsible for doing</p>

live on new estates. Can this policy cover all new housing estates to include all tax payers in WODC?		Member for Environment.	that. We can't improve on that. We are responsible for removing fly tipping from Council and public land.
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