

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB
at 5.30 pm on **Wednesday, 16 April 2025**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Joy Aitman (Vice-Chair), Mike Baggaley, Adam Clements, Julian Cooper, Genny Early, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Michele Mead, Elizabeth Poskitt, Carl Rylett, Sandra Simpson, Ruth Smith, Alistair Wray, Liam Walker and Alex Wilson

Officers: Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Tatiana Bell (Nature Recovery Officer), Melanie Dodd (Senior Biodiversity Officer), Hannah Kenyon (Climate Change Manager) and Heather McCulloch (Community Wellbeing Manager)

Executive Members in attendance: Andrew Prosser, Geoff Saul and Alaric Smith

116 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments

Apologies were received from Councillors Thomas Ashby and Stuart McCarroll.

Councillors Liz Leffman and Adam Clements left at 19:08 and did not discuss the work plan.

117 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

118 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolutions in several of the items stated “The Committee noted the report and did not agree any recommendations to the Executive”. It was proposed that “and did not agree any recommendations to the Executive” be removed as it implied the Committee disagreed.

The minutes as amended were proposed by Councillor Mark Walker and seconded by Councillor Natalie King. These were voted on and approved unanimously.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee approve the minutes of the meeting held on 5 March as an accurate record of that meeting.

119 Report back on recommendations

There were no recommendations to the Executive arising from the previous Committee meeting.

120 Chair's announcements

The Chair stated that aside from the additional meeting on 13 May it was the Committee’s last scheduled meeting and thanked all Members for their work.

The Chair stated that at the previous meeting of the Committee, the start time of the additional meeting was left to be agreed and proposed a 4:30pm start time for this meeting.

The Committee resolved to agree to the 4:30pm start time.

The Chair reminded members that the Council was in a pre-election period ahead of the Oxfordshire County Council elections and that members should refrain from making reference to political campaigns.

121 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

122 The Nature Recovery Plan

The purpose of the report was to update on the delivery of the Nature Recovery Plan.

Councillor Andrew Prosser, the Executive Member for Climate Action and Nature Recovery, introduced the item. Councillor Prosser explained that in 2019 the Council had declared a Climate and Ecological emergency and that these were intrinsically linked. The Nature Recovery Strategy expanded on the objectives of the Climate Change Strategy, which was a key Council priority. The Nature Recovery Strategy had been adopted in 2024, and this was the first annual progress update.

Members discussed the report, raising the following points:

- The report showed great progress against the strategy, and the coronation orchards and wildflower meadows were particularly welcome.
- For future reports it would be welcome if progress could be specifically measured against key performance indicators.
- A typographical error in the report was pointed out, as it should state 'King Charles III' not 'King Charles II'.
- The use of Glyphosates herbicides was discussed. In particular, the Council's own use and how Town and Parish Councils could be encouraged to reduce their reliance on these. The Climate Change Manager agreed with this and stated that the team was involved in the Waste Environmental Services Programme, and would be working to ensure that the new services would take into account nature standards. They also stated that they would be working with parishes to ensure that they are supported, for instance through the sharing of good practice.
- The Climate Change Manager stated that they would contact Ubico to monitor the use of Glyphosates.
- The Community orchards had been extended to March. The Nature Recovery Officer explained that the 162 trees and 17 orchards had been planted in the previous financial

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year, and that they were working with Wild Oxfordshire to undertake community outreach with parish councils.

- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) was discussed. The introduction of BNG was being supported by the Principal Ecologist, who was working with the planning team to increase knowledge of the requirements of this scheme. The Council would be able to charge developers a BNG monitoring fee which would allow proactive monitoring and enforcement.
- Clarity was needed on whether parish meetings were included within the definitions of parish councils within the report.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

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Community Safety Partnership

Councillor Geoff Saul, the Executive Member for Housing and Social Care, introduced the item. The Executive Member stated that West Oxfordshire had one of the lowest crime rates in the Country but that there had been a recent increase in rural crime. The Executive Member highlighted the work of the rural crime project in addressing this, which was a joint project across West Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse.

In discussion, the following points were raised;

- A Member briefing would be held with the Chief Constable on 5 June. The Community Wellbeing Manager encouraged all members to attend this briefing, and pose their questions to the Chief Constable directly.
- Drug offences were discussed, which were not broken down by the type of substance. One member raised a perceived police inaction over cannabis use in Housing Association properties and the need for Housing Associations to be informed if rules were breached. The Officer stated that they would take this away to request details.
- Concerns were raised over the fact that the peak age group for victims of sex offences was 11-14, and that the peak age for suspects of many types of crime was 18-21. Members asked whether more engagement with schools was needed over this, and suggested councillors who are also teachers could help support outreach activities. The Community Wellbeing Manager also stated that a Youth Development Officer was now in post and that they could work on this area.
- Awareness Campaigns such as Ask for Angela were still in place but relied on constant communication due to the high turnover of staff in sectors such as hospitality.
- Concerns were raised over the 65% increase in common assault.
- The work of Police Community Support Officers was valuable but there were insufficient personnel.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

Review of the Overview and Scrutiny Function

The purpose of the item was present the findings of a self-assessment survey carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of the transition from a structure of three overview and scrutiny committees to a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and explained that in November 2023, Full Council resolved to change the structure of the three overview and scrutiny committees, replacing them with a single 24 seat Committee. The report presented the results of the survey, highlighting that the change had been considered to be successful overall, and recommended a reduction of the Committee's size and a greater use of Task and Finish groups.

In discussion, the following points were raised;

- The reduction in the Committee's size, as recommended to Full Council by the Constitution Working Group (CWG) was discussed. Members who were not part of the CWG wished to know more details about why a reduction had been recommended and how the Working Groups would function in practice. Members on the Committee who were also on the CWG explained that the rationale behind reducing the Committee was because meetings were often poorly attended, and the large size created difficulties finding substitute members. Members on the CWG had felt that the use of task and finish groups would enable members who were not on the Committee to input but ensure that discussion on the main Committee remained focused. In response to requests from Members to do so, the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services explained that this could be highlighted within the Full Council report.
- It was suggested that Overview and Scrutiny training be open to all members.
- It was suggested that a 16-member committee may be more mathematically simple.
- Changes to the Committee's size were constitutional matters and therefore required a recommendation to the Council by the Constitution Working Group, whereas improvements such as training and working group formation were within the Committee's remit.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and the planned improvements to the overview and scrutiny function.

Committee Work Programme

The purpose of the item was to agree a provisional work programme for the 2025–26 year, which would be reviewed and handed over to the new committee post-Annual Council.

The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services introduced the work plan and highlighted the items that officers had indicatively allocated to the work plan, and the three Task and Finish Groups proposed by the Council's management team. Members were invited to review these and make any suggestions for additional topics, with reference to the "TOPIC" (Timely, Organisational Priority, Public Interest, Influence, Cost) criteria.

Members discussed the report and work programme, raising the following points;

- There were several suggestions for scrutiny that could also be Task and Finish Groups, such as Local Area Energy and the Youth Needs Assessment. Mental Health was also proposed as a topic, and it was suggested that members of the task and finish group undergo specific training on this topic to accompany this.
- Upon understanding how Task and Finish Groups would work, members felt less concerned about the proposed reduction in the size of the Committee.
- The briefing on 8 May clashed with VE day celebrations.
- The Local Government Reorganisation briefing topic may need to come to the Committee on a subsequent occasion as well, depending on developments.
- It was asked how members who were not part of the Committee could take part in the meetings, the Head of Electoral and Democratic Services explained that they could do so through substituting for those who had sent apologies. They could also attend as an observer and take part at the discretion of the Chair.
- The call-in mechanism was open to any member of the Committee to pursue if they wished, and not a power only available to the Chair.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and work programme, which would be updated to reflect the Committee's input.

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Executive Work Programme

The Committee agreed to add the Car Parking Strategy to its work plan for pre-decision scrutiny.

The Meeting closed at 7.23 pm

CHAIR