

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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

Held in the Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28
INB at 5.30 pm on **Wednesday, 3 September 2025**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Genny Early (Vice-Chair), Steve Cosier, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Paul Marsh, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, Ruth Smith, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray

Officers: Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Georgina Dyer (Head of Finance), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Mathew Taylor (Democratic Services Officer), James Edney (Youth Development Officer), Heather McCulloch (Community Wellbeing Manager) and Hannah Kenyon (Climate Change Manager)

Other Councillors in attendance: Andy Graham, Andrew Prosser and Alaric Smith.

31 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments

Apologies were received from Councillor Adam Clements.

32 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

33 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Genny Early, Vice-Chair of the Committee, noted that the wording of recommendation 5 on car parks attached to the minutes should have included a reference to greening of car parking spaces as well as environmental standards.

Subject to the amendment, Councillor Alex Wilson proposed accepting the minutes of the meeting on 2 July 2025, and Councillor Michele Mead seconded this.

The minutes were voted on and unanimously agreed.

34 Chair's announcements

Councillor Early provided an update on the recent scrutiny training sessions.

Councillor Early advised that the training had been split into sessions on principles of scrutiny and questioning skills. The training had provided some useful tools for the Committee. The slides and notes could be made available to those who did not attend.

35 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

36 Report back on recommendations

The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services stated that the Committee's recommendations in relation to Car Parking Strategy and Climate Change Strategy had been responded to by the Executive, as set out in an annex to the minutes of the previous meeting and pages 15-18 of the Agenda Pack.

The Chair invited comments from the Committee of which there were none.

Councillor Natalie King arrived at 17:38.

37 2025/26 Quarterly Finance Review Q1

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the item and was supported by Madhu Richards, Director of Finance, and Georgina Dyer, Head of Finance. The Executive Member made the following points;

- At the end of quarter 1 there was an overall underspend of £260,745.
- Key factors driving the position were: additional income from Trade Waste; the Leisure Contract; vacant positions and better than expected performance in respect of the materials recycling contract.
- The Recycling contract had commenced in September 2024. Between September 2024 and March 2025, the contract had saved the Council an average of £60,000 per month. In quarter 1 the contract was £25,000 underspent against the reduced base budget.
- Green Waste income was £30,000 behind target; however, the net income was £1.2m.
- Trade waste was £164,000 above target and was partially offset by expenditure on bins and boxes. The estimate for the year end position was £216,000 underspent.
- Legal shared service vacancies had resulting in an underspend in the quarter. Subsequent recruitment to these posts had meant that this saving would cease, however Officers were now in post which was positive.
- Development Management appeals were underspent by £24,975 in quarter 1, however it was noted that this was dependent on the actions of third parties.
- In the Conservation Service two vacant posts had resulted in an underspend, these positions had now been recruited to.
- The Leisure contract was £41,000 ahead of budget.

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- The Government's proposals for The Fairer Funding Review and Business Rates Reset were out for consultation until 12 August 2025. Final proposals were expected to follow by the end of October. The Council was aware that it would receive less funding, however the position was no worse than expected or planned for.

In discussion, members raised the following points:

- Although decisions would be influenced by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) there was a need to ensure that there were no gaps in services and contracts.
- A query was raised as to the degree of planned capital expenditure and the use of external borrowing. The Officer explained that all current planned expenditure would not require external borrowing. On the current LGR timetable, the Council's last budget would be for 2027/28, with a Shadow Authority budgeting for 2028/29. Therefore, considerations for capital expenditure and borrowing would be a key question for the next budget cycle.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and Officers for their presentation to the Committee.

Resolved: The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

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2025/26 Quarterly Service Review Q1

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the item and was supported by Gemma Moreing, Business Information and Performance Lead. The Executive Member made the following points;

- The Report was being taken to the Executive meeting on 10 September 2025, and comments from the Committee were welcome ahead of this.
- The report was broadly positive. Section 2.1 contained a broad summary of performance, section 3.1 showed service areas with performance above target, of which there were a considerable number.
- Section 3.3 contained detail of service performance that was below target. These were expanded on by the Officer making the following points:
 - Processing times for Council Tax Support Change Events and Housing Benefit Change of Circumstances were below target due to a planned one-month pause in uploading Universal Credit Applications. Since resuming such uploads, batch automation rates had consistently exceeded 90% and processing times had significantly improved which should address the issues.
 - The percentage of household waste recycling was below target which mirrored a national trend due to seasonal and structural factors. In particular, the unusually dry weather had led to a reduction in garden waste tonnages.

In discussion, members raised the following points:

- The Committee sought an explanation as to how recycling was measured and calculated.
- What steps could be taken to improve communication with the service users regarding recycling. There was a useful pdf document on the Council website, which could be presented differently.
- Despite the Council being rated highly for recycling rates in benchmarking terms, the results were static. As this was the case could improvements be investigated?
- It would be useful if measurements could be separated for garden and general waste in order to get a truer picture of performance trends.
- With the falling garden waste rate had there been a noticeable increase in use of the local tip?
- What was the verification process for plastic recycling.
- The Committee discussed the merits of a separate Task and Finish Group for this area of Waste. It was noted that such work could be included in an expanded remit for the existing Waste Transformation Task and Finish Group. The Committee expressed a preference for expansion of the existing remit of the current Group.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and Officers for their presentation to the Committee.

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

Responding to the Youth Needs Assessment

Councillor Andy Graham, The Leader of the Council, introduced the item and was supported by Heather McCulloch, Community Wellbeing Manager and James Edney, Youth Development Officer. The Executive Member made the following points;

- The Report had been requested by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- The Council had expressed a commitment to assess and address the needs of young people.
- Young people were often not at the table for discussions about what they needed and the nature of the rural district made accessing services difficult.
- James Edney, Youth Development Officer, was introduced. The Officer made the following points:
 - He was a trained youth worker, with experience at Oxfordshire Youth and Thame Town Council.
 - In his first six months in post he had visited communities and had subsequently identified 6 priority areas which were shown in section 4.1 of the report.

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- There had been some further developments since the report: Stonesfield “have a go day” had taken place and been successful; Topaz, Chipping Norton Town Council and Chippy Pride were now looking to develop a LGBTQI+ group in the town; Witney Youth Partnership would continue, and would focus on issues of exploitation, this would involve networking with other organisations; a job fair would be held on 25 September 2025.
- The Officer expressed that he was happy to take questions and suggestions for future actions from the Committee.

In discussion, members raised the following points:

- Should there be a tangible target for the work being undertaken and clarity on what it was hoped would be achieved. The six priority areas were restated for the Committee.
- This was a discretionary initiative from the Council and Youth Services was in the remit of the County Council.
- Past cuts to services and changes in youth culture had left a patchwork provision of services for young people.
- The Youth Development Officer’s role was suggested to be one of facilitating communication and giving advice, not hosting events and groups. A Councillor gave the example of the Stonesfield “have a go day”, for which the Officer had acted as “glue” to connect local people who facilitated the event.
- A suggestion was made that green-gyms, hedge laying and dry-stone walling may be looked at as potential activities.
- The Officer could contact the local private schools as he had with the state schools. The Officer agreed to follow this suggestion up.
- The Officer could contact local sports clubs who had a strong record for mental health initiatives. The Officer would take away the suggestion. It was noted that some local boxing clubs had been approached.
- Some young people struggled at school and were left with a feeling of not belonging. Alternative provision was therefore crucial.
- The work to support young girls was noted as of particular importance.
- Young people were a valuable and vital voice in society.
- When facilitating groups for young people there was a need for an adult to manage this. Difficulties in attracting volunteers and potential resources for how this could be supported were explored. The officer noted that, since Covid and exacerbated by the financial crises which meant people may have less free time, there had been a drastic decline in volunteering. There was also the need for volunteers to undertake checks such as DBS. It was noted that in general Oxfordshire performed well for volunteering but there was variance in numbers across groups.
- There was a degree of professionalism required to work with young people that not all individuals had.
- The Youth Development Officer role was fixed term for a period of two years.

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- The Officer was asked about the groups he had met in Carterton. The Officer discussed the profile of each group and advised that he intended to work with Community Builders and there was the potential for S106 monies to be used in the town.
- Many existing groups were only open for specified short period and there may be a need for a more fluid drop-in provision akin to a youth club. In the discussion it was noted that youth clubs were large commitments and were often not sustainable beyond an initial period. Successful youth clubs tended to be operating in heavily populated areas and with large financial support, this may not be viable in many areas of West Oxfordshire.
- The establishment of a climate forum and young people's voices around this area. The Officer noted that work was ongoing with the Council's Climate Team around engaging young people.
- The 3,908 responses to the Youth Needs Assessment was considered to represent a very good response rate.
- A query was raised as to if the plan was to bring volunteers to the community or the young people to the volunteer. The Officer expressed that it was the intention for groups to be operated by people from the communities themselves.
- A query was raised as to why groups such as Scouts had not been included in the report. The Officers noted that such "uniformed organisations" were defined differently to Youth Work.
- The use of media to attract volunteers and young people was discussed. The Officer noted that this was not part of his work as he was not running groups himself. However, the Officer would assist where possible.
- The Development Control and Planning Policy Officers had previously expressed and intention to include young people in their engagement. The Committee was unsure if this had been actioned.
- It was suggested that a recommendation should be made that this local role should continue following LGR. The Executive Member agreed to take this point for consideration.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and Officers for their report and engagement with the Committee.

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

Oxfordshire Local Area Energy Planning

Councillor Andrew Prosser, Executive Member for Climate Action and Nature Recovery, introduced the item and was supported by Hannah Kenyon, Climate Change Manager. The Executive Member made the following points;

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- Local area energy planning was a process which set out the pathway on how to get from the current energy system to zero-carbon.
- The Oxfordshire Leaders Joint Committee had supported the six Oxfordshire Councils to develop Local Area Energy Plans (LAEP).
- Plans sought to squeeze energy demand and increase the use of renewable energy sources as well as ensuring infrastructure was in place to support this.
- Phase 1 would close soon, and the plan entered phase 2 at this point. Phase 2 translated analysis into district-level action plans which would help councils to prioritise projects such as renewable energy generation, energy storage and infrastructure improvement.
- The timing of the development of the LAEP was key in terms of its input into the emerging Local Plan. The LAEP would help identify places for development, constraints and where investment was needed.

The Committee made a number of recommendations to the Executive, which are included as an annex to these minutes.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and Officers for their presentation.

Resolved: The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and agreed to submit recommendations to the Executive.

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Updates from Task and Finish Groups

Councillor Early provided a verbal update to the Committee on the work of the Public Conveniences Task and Finish Group. The group had met at the end of July 2025 and the discussion had focussed on:

- The options to be presented in the upcoming Executive report which would be taken to the September meeting.
- The cost per use of the various facilities.
- The ownership of the various facilities.
- The Group would continue for a further year and focus on potential changes to pricing and enhancement to the facilities.

A query was raised as to the total value of the public conveniences. The Officers agreed to return to the Committee on this point.

Councillor Stuart McCarroll provided a verbal update to the Committee on the work of the Leisure Strategy Task and Finish Group:

- The Group had met on 10 June 2025, and the following issues were discussed:
 - The Council's proposed Leisure Options Appraisal.

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- The need to continue to increase the use of facilities.
 - The difficulties with the booking systems.
 - Acquiring better performance data for the facilities.
 - Benchmarking.
- The Group had also met on 3 September 2025, and the following issues were discussed:
 - The emerging Executive report.
 - The non-core facilities being financially supported by the core-facilities under all models.
 - Work was still required to underpin the cost assumptions in the final report.
 - The options available for the facilities, which included: re-procurement; contract extension; Local Authorities Trading Companies and asset transfers to third-party providers.
 - The issues presented by LGR for leisure facilities.
 - The timeline for the consideration of the Executive report, including pre-decision scrutiny was provided to the Committee.
 - The Executive report would be fully exempt and any discussion at the October Committee meeting (following the next Task and Finish Group meeting) may necessitate the Committee moving to private session.

42 Committee Work Programme

The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services advised the Committee that the item on LGR, initially scheduled for 8 October 2025, was now expected to be brought to the Committee in November 2025. This change was to align the Council's approach with the other Councils across the County.

It was noted that the Local Plan Spatial Options item was being brought to the Committee in October.

Resolved: That the Committee accept the work plan.

43 Executive Work Programme

The Chair invited comments from the Committee on the Executive Work Programme.

It was noted that there would be an all-member briefing for the Local Plan.

The Chair thanked attendees and closed the meeting.

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The meeting closed at 7:52 pm.

The Meeting closed at 7.54 pm

CHAIR