

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the

Executive

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB
at 2.00 pm on **Thursday, 13 November 2025**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andy Graham, Duncan Enright, Lidia Arciszewska, Hugo Ashton, Rachel Crouch, Andrew Prosser, Geoff Saul, Alaric Smith and Tim Sumner

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive Officer), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance and Regulatory Services), Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant), Mandy Fathers (Business Manager - Environmental, Welfare & Revenue Service), Astrid Harvey (Strategic Policy and Partnerships Officer), Heather McCulloch (Community Wellbeing Manager), Philip Measures (Service Leader), Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Mark Pritchard (Head of Communications and Corporate Strategy) and Mathew Taylor (Democratic Services Officer)

Other Councillors in attendance: Julian Cooper

414 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

415 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

416 Minutes of Previous Meeting

There were no amendments to the minutes of the previous meetings held on 15 October 2025 and 22 October 2025.

The minutes were proposed by Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council.

Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader of the Council, seconded the proposal.

The proposal was voted on and approved unanimously.

RESOLVED:

To approve the minutes of the previous meetings held on 15 October 2025 and 22 October 2025.

417 Receipt of Announcements

There were no announcements.

418 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

419 Reports from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had met on 3 September 2025 to consider the work of the Youth Development Officer. The Committee had made four recommendations which were included in the agenda to the meeting on pages 21-22. The Executive thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their engagement and Officers for their work in this area. The Executive agreed to all of recommendations made.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had also met on 11 November 2025 to consider the proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The Committee had made three recommendations which were included as a supplement to the agenda for this meeting. The recommendations and Executive response were dealt with under Item 11 of the agenda.

420 Matters raised by Audit and Governance Committee

The Audit and Governance Committee had not met since the last meeting of the Executive.

421 Westhive update and consideration of future options

Councillor Rachel Crouch, Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities presented the item, the purpose of which was to provide an update on the progress of the Westhive scheme to date and to set out the options for future delivery.

In her presentation Councillor Crouch made the following points:

- The report presented options for the future delivery of the Westhive scheme, however consideration of these options was intended to be reported to the Executive in December.
- Westhive was launched in October 2023. There had been four rounds of funding with twenty-eight projects that had successfully reached their project funding targets. Twelve of the projects had benefitted children and young people which was in accordance with Council priorities.

Executive

13/November2025

- The total amount of funding secured to date using the platform was £948,172, of which the Council and Community Infrastructure Fund investment (CIF) combined had contributed £446,433.
- The platform had attracted a diverse range of groups and included those groups that may not ordinarily engage in Council schemes.
- Projects were reviewed and scored by Officers, before being considered by a panel that included the Leader of the Council, Chief Executive, Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities and other Executive Members. Award decisions were delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council.
- The Council had a full-time Community Funding Officer the work of whom had been invaluable.
- Spacehive were the current host for the platform, the three-year contract with Spacehive was due to end 30 April 2026. The contract with Spacehive for hosting the platform was £30,000 annually.

The Officer responsible for the report was then invited to comment by Councillor Andy Graham. The Officer advised that round five of funding had recently been approved and included nine projects with a total of £120k granted in funding from the two funds. The Officer clarified that the report contained recommendations for budget setting for Westhive in addition to recommendations that concerned the start of work on future hosting. It was intended that a further report would be brought to the Executive in December to consider in full the options for future hosting for the scheme.

A Member highlighted that it was important to differentiate between Westhive and the UK Share Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund which also both issued funding through the platform but were not within the funding being considered at the meeting. It was stated that the use of the platform allowed the UK Share Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund to have increased transparency, and this was the reason for the use of the mechanism.

Councillor Crouch proposed accepting the recommendations of the report.

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council seconded the proposal

This was voted on and approved unanimously.

RESOLVED

That the Executive:

1. Considered as part of the 2026/2027 budget setting process, the inclusion of a budget for 'one off' community grant funding, at £120k per year for a three year period from 2026-2029.

Executive

13/November2025

2. Requested officers consider all feedback and platform hosting options, reporting back to Executive in December 2025.
3. Delegated the responsibility of working through the procurement of a new multi-year contract to the Director of Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance and the Executive Member for Stronger Healthy Communities.

422

Council tax support 2026/27

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the item the purpose of which was to consider and recommend to Full Council the revised Council Tax Support Scheme for the financial year 2026/2027.

In his introduction Councillor Smith advised that:

- Councils were required to review their Council Tax Support (CTS) schemes each year.
- Annual wage growth was expected to be between 3% and 4% in Q4 of 2025 and remaining at a similar level during 2026. Therefore, without changes to the CTS scheme, this would result in more households being moved into a high-income band and as a result having to pay a higher share of the full Council Tax for their property.
- To continue to give support to households during the ongoing cost of living crisis, proposals were being made to increase income bands by 3.5% or in line with the inflationary increase in welfare benefits.
- In 2022/2023 the Council implemented a Hardship Fund to support those residents who were struggling financially. The fund was created with financial support from Oxfordshire County Council, and West Oxfordshire District Council. There remained in excess of £78,000 in the fund. It was recommended that any funding surplus be transferred into the financial year 2026/2027.
- The proposed changes increased the estimated cost of the CTS scheme by approximately £47,304 in the 2026/27 financial year which would be reflected in a decrease in the Council Tax base and Council Tax income. The decrease in income would be spread proportionately across the major precepting authorities and resulted in a loss of income the Council of £2,504.30. This loss of income would be considered as part of the 2026/2027 budget setting process.

Councillor Smith proposed accepting the recommendations of the report.

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council seconded the proposal

This was voted on and approved unanimously.

RESOLVED:

13/November2025

That Executive recommended to Full Council to:

1. Agree the increase to income bands from 1 April 2026 of 3.5% or the inflationary increase in welfare benefits, whichever is greater.
2. Agree that any surplus in the Hardship Fund is transferred over to 2026/2027.

423

Private Sector Housing and Caravan Sites policy review and update.

Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for Environment, introduced the item, the purpose of which was to renew the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy and Caravan Sites Policy. Councillor Arciszewska asked the Officer present to give the relevant points to the Executive which raised the following:

- The report had updated existing policies and taken into account the recent legislative changes concerning caravan site regulation and the significant changes to private sector housing regulation. It also had considered the imminent Renters Reform Bill, due to pass in October. It was timely to adopt the policies being considered now as this would allow the Council to incorporate changes as a result of the Bill. The policies would be reviewed in twelve months, and every three years after.
- The policies had been aligned with the Council's priorities in its Housing Strategy, Enforcement Policy and Long-Term Empty Homes Strategy and set out commitments to: tackle poor conditions in private housing; work with partners to ensure homes met required standards; bring long-term empty properties back into use; and tackle unlicensed HMOs (Houses in Multiple Occupancy).
- New requirements for mobile home sites had been introduced in 2020 that required sites to appoint a Fit and Proper Person, and the Council was now required to administer and enforce this requirement. The policy that was presented had accommodated this and other new provisions and had set out the approach to this work.
- Briefings on the Policies would be provided for Members in future that would include updates on changes in legislation, responsibilities on the Council and new powers.

In response to a question from a Member, the Officer advised that, as a result of the Renters Right Act, additional powers and responsibilities on the Council now included: investigatory powers and powers to require information; duties to investigate illegal evictions; and, in the future, a requirement to administer and enforce landlord databases.

A further question was raised around partner authorities and the degree of engagement that had taken place. The Officer advised that in the context of the policies "partners" had referred to the Publica Councils, in terms of the sharing of resources, and the Oxfordshire Authorities. Regular meetings had taken place with these partners to consider joint working on these matters, especially with LGR in mind, and also with regard to the stock conditions survey, where joint procurement could achieve savings.

Executive

13/November2025

Councillor Arciszewska proposed accepting the recommendations of the report.

Councillor Geoff Saul, Executive Member Housing and Social Care, seconded the proposal and suggested that this was an important function of the Private Sector Housing Strategy and was key to ensuring that housing was safe and secure, which was a key responsibility of the Council.

This was voted on and approved unanimously.

RESOLVED:

That the Executive:

1. Approved the Private Sector Housing Strategy as set out in Annex A and the Mobile Homes Policy as set out in Annex B.
2. Recommended to Council to approve a new Stock Conditions Survey.
3. Instructed / authorised officers to schedule the next Stock Conditions Survey once budgetary provision has been made.

424

Local Government Reorganisation

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the item, the purpose of which was to provide the three full proposals for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire, in response to the Government's formal invitation on the 5 February 2025.

Prior to considering the recommendations to the Executive, Councillor Graham thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their recommendations on proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) which were included as a supplement to the agenda for this meeting. Councillor Graham then invited comments on the recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee from the Executive which raised the following points:

- Recommendation 1 from the Committee was welcomed, in particular its reference to the need to strengthen the focus in the two unitary proposal on agriculture. It was noted that, as the two unitary proposal included Oxford City, there was a need to ensure the challenges faced by the rural and farming communities were recognised. It was also suggested that it was important to support transport for the rural food sector, including farmers. Part of the work of a new authority could include improvements in the use of fertilisers and nutrients in the farming sector.
- A Member commented that it would be beneficial to build on the work of the Community Safety Partnership with Thames Valley Police which was particularly important in rural areas.

Executive

13/November2025

Councillor Graham concluded that the rural impacts of LGR were rightly highlighted by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, including impacts on farming, rural crime and food security. Councillor Graham proposed that the Executive accepted the recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The proposal was unanimously agreed by the Executive.

Councillor Graham informed the meeting that the Executive had invited Members of the Council, at their meeting on 12 November 2025, to consider and present views on the submission of a full proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils and Oxford City Council and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council. Councillor Graham read the comments made by the Council, which were included in a supplement to the agenda.

A Member noted that an observation that had been raised by Council but had been omitted from the supplement, was the need for a stronger emphasis on a bottom-up approach in a new authority in order to ensure groups that were disengaged with local politics were considered. This was noted by Councillor Graham and could be addressed by Officers.

Councillor Graham thanked the Council for their observations which had been very useful and reminded those present that not all councils considering such proposals had provided an opportunity for Members to comment. Councillor Graham proposed that the comments made by Council were noted and that Officers would use them as appropriate in the finalisation of the submission. The proposal was unanimously agreed by the Executive.

Councillor Graham then invited the Executive Members to comment on the proposals, which raised the following points:

- Members thanked Officers of the Council for their work on the proposal. The work on the proposals had been collaborative with other councils and this should be noted.
- All Members of the Executive favoured the two unitary option. However, some Members concluded that all proposals had valuable aspects in addition to potential issues along with areas that required work.
- It was suggested that it was difficult to compare aspects of the single unitary proposal with its counterparts because it did not include West-Berkshire. It was noted that the two and three unitary proposals had included West-Berkshire.
- A potential flaw in a single unitary option was that the diversity across the County made it difficult to argue that there was a continuous related geography.
- The creation of a boundary across the centre of the Oxfordshire Economic Area was suggested to be a potential issue with the two unitary proposal.

13/November2025

- The merits of the three proposals in terms of a potential future Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) were discussed.
- With regard to economic development, it was suggested that a single unitary proposal may undervalue the contributions of the West and North of the County, while the two and three unitary models were more ambitious for these regions.
- The importance of local voices being heard within a new authority were highlighted.
- A number of Members commented that they considered the proposals as an opportunity to re-imagine, redesign and re-evaluate how councils provide services in order to make these better and more responsive. It was felt that the single unitary proposal did not achieve this and instead focussed on the absorption of the district councils into Oxfordshire County Council's existing structures.
- Financially the proposals delivered similar benefits. It could have been suggested that the two unitary proposal had a higher initial costs but this was a one-off.
- Members commented further on the lack of satisfaction with some current service delivery. Examples of feedback that had been received from their parishes and constituents were provided. Such experiences were suggested to be an illustration of how improvements were needed, and re-evaluation was required as part of a new structure.
- The two unitary proposal was suggested to create a structure that was large enough, in terms of both government criteria and economies of scale, gave financial resilience but still retained the engagement with the community that the Council currently provided.
- The two unitary proposal was suggested to be balanced as it included the city, rural communities and market towns. The inclusion of two rural districts would provide balance with the City of Oxford and ensured that these regions were represented in the new structure. The affinity many residents of the districts had felt with Oxford, many whom worked, travelled or studied there, was regarded as a positive aspect of the two unitary proposal.
- The Shared Waste and Environment Services Programme was provided as an example of successful collaborative working. This had involved many councils across the County. This collaboration could be used in the proposal as an example for other areas of work in a new authority, such as flood management and nature recovery.
- The two unitary proposal was considered to be the best vehicle to build on the existing good practices in Leisure. These included improved access, carbon reduction and increased investment.
- There was existing collaborative work with other Oxfordshire councils in climate and nature recovery, and it was hoped that this would be enhanced by a new authority.
- The two unitary proposal recognised the importance of the rural hinterland to Oxford, particularly regarding food supply chains.
- A Member noted that there was an interconnection of rivers and water flow between the districts involved in the two unitary proposal and Oxford City. All headwaters of the River Thames were in these districts. Therefore, the city relied on actions of those districts for flood protection and fresh-water provision.

Executive

13/November2025

- The proposals were considered in terms of the number of electors per Councillor that they contained. The single unitary proposal appeared to be the least accessible in these terms. The three unitary proposal, whilst having more Councillors, was considered to have too strong of a focus on Oxford City. The two unitary model was considered to provide the best balance on number of electors per Councillor.
- The merits of the proposals in terms of planning were raised. The single unitary proposal had suggested it would have one planning committee which would mean the loss of local knowledge and input into decisions. The three-unitary model had an unrealistic housing target.

A Member present gave an example of the confusion that could arise with a two-tier authority and could be solved by a single authority.

The Chief Executive gave an update on the work on the proposal to date. The work had included collaboration across councils and the creative approach adopted for the two unitary proposal was evident in the work.

Councillor Graham proposed accepting the recommendations of the report and summarised by stating that all the proposals would deliver services, but the consideration of the proposals should include how well those services could be delivered by each. The two unitary proposal gave the opportunity to reshape and correct mistakes and not simply reconfigure the existing systems. It was important that the new larger structure did not suit only one of its constituent parts. The two unitary proposal made its case on the basis of evidence and met the Government criteria. Other proposals lacked the ambition of the two unitary proposal which maintained its community connection. Councillor Graham considered that the work undertaken on the proposal to date was the end of the beginning and reiterated that he hoped the Government would listen to the evidence when making its decision. Councillor Graham considered that the decision on a new authority was not just about money but also about quality of life for residents.

Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader of the Council, seconded the proposal.

This was voted on and approved unanimously.

RESOLVED:

That the Executive:

1. Noted that since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work has been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and that West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils' officers have engaged with officers across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Executive

13/November2025

2. Noted that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.
3. Considered the views of Council at their meeting on the 12 November 2025 regarding the three unitary models.
4. Considered approving the submission of a full proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires' and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway'
5. Subject to approval, noted that Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council will jointly submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.
6. Delegated authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to make any final amendments to the full proposal and associated documents for the 2 unitary model prior to submission to Government.

The Meeting closed at Time Not Specified

CHAIR