

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, 3 December 2025**

PRESENT

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

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive Officer), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance and Regulatory Services), Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant), Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and Mathew Taylor (Democratic Services Officer)

Other Councillors in attendance:

CL.51 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Michelle Mead
- Joy Aitman
- Rosie Pearson
- Adam Clements
- Sandra Cosier
- Adrian Walsh
- Mark Walker
- David Cooper

CL.52 Declarations of Interest

Declarations of Interest were received as follows:

In relation to the appointment of an independent person onto the Audit and Governance Committee:

Councillor Jane Doughty declared that she knew Victoria Field well in a professional capacity, and that she would be leaving the room for the item.

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In relation to Motion A:

Councillor Dan Levy declared that he was an Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet Member.

Councillor Liz Leffman declared that she was the Leader of Oxfordshire County Council.

Councillor Michael Brooker declared that he was employed by Oxfordshire County Council as a firefighter.

The Chair explained that in January 2023 Council agreed to grant a general dispensation to all members on setting a local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, which is valid until January 2027. This meant that all members could participate in and vote on the Council Tax Support Scheme even if they had a financial interest.

Any members in receipt of Council Tax support did not need to make a declaration.

CL.53 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 October 2025 and the Extraordinary meeting held on 12 November 2025 were considered separately.

In turn, Councillor Andy Graham proposed accepting the minutes of the meeting held on 1 October followed by the minutes on 12 November. In both cases this was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright.

They were both agreed unanimously.

Resolved: To approve the minutes of the meetings held on 1 October 2025 and 12 November 2025.

CL.54 Receipt of Announcements

Under his announcements, the Chair highlighted his civic engagements as follows;

- Thanked those who had attended his civic dinner, and explained that generous donations had raised over £900 for the Chair's charities.
- The Chair had invited Members to the civic Carol Service at St. Bartholomew's Church in Ducklington.

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader, made the following announcements:

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- Letters in response to the motions on illegal e-bikes and the planning and infrastructure bills had been received and distributed to members.
- The submission of the Council's Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) proposal had been acknowledged.

Councillor Duncan Enright, the Deputy Leader, made the following announcement:

- Reports from the Christmas markets on Marriotts Walk had shown that footfall and Car Park usage had both increased, as had revenue and social media engagement from the event.

Councillor Rachel Crouch, Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing, made the following announcement:

- A two hour long mental health training session would be taking place run by Oxfordshire Mind. Details had been emailed to Members.

Councillor Andrew Prosser made the following announcement:

- The Oxfordshire Nature recovery strategy had launched a month prior, and a briefing would be held for Members the following day at 5:30pm on Teams.

CL.55 Participation of the Public

The Chair explained that no submissions had been received by the deadline but that two members of the public had attended wishing to speak on Motion A. The Chair proposed allowing them to speak and suspending Rule 11.1 of the Council's procedure rules in order to do so. The was agreed by general consent of the Council.

Mr Jonathan Shuker, representing the Fire Brigades Union, addressed the Council. The speaker thanked Councillors Liam Walker and Nick Leverton for raising the motion and expressed serious concerns about proposals to close fire stations in West Oxfordshire and other areas, reduce fire engines and whole-time crews, and cut retained support officers, which would impact response times, firefighter safety, and recruitment. They highlighted potential loss of around 14% of on-call firefighters, the introduction of 12-hour shifts, and issues with response times. The Speaker felt that changes should involve consultation with firefighters rather than being made public without prior engagement. The speaker acknowledged the need for change but urged collaborative discussion to protect both communities and firefighters.

CL.56 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 and answers are detailed in a separate document appended to the Minutes of the Meeting. There were no supplementary questions.

The Director of Governance and Regulatory Services explained that due to an administrative error, part of the answer for question 4 had been missed. Councillor Lidia Arciszewska read this out;

“Most of Oxfordshire’s neighbouring authorities had already introduced the booking system for visits to domestic waste recycling centres. There is no evidence of an increase in fly-tipping where such a service method had been set up. However, any change to waste and recycling collection requires monitoring to make sure that there are no unwelcome side effects. West Oxfordshire’s fly-tipping management service has improved significantly over the last few years. The service led multiple surveillance operations in fly-tipping hotspots, leading to cessation of fly-tipping activities in those areas. The number of investigations and penalty notices served also increased. Moreover, a lot of effort has been put into proactive work, such as engaging with Parish Councils and developing strong relationships with Thames Valley Police and HMRC; these efforts now include ‘stop and search’ sessions.

The Council will therefore be monitoring the situation closely and will act according to need.”

Councillor Walker stated that he may have a follow up but would need the information in writing.

CL.57 Council tax support 2026/27

The purpose of the item was to consider and recommend to Full Council the revised Council Tax Support Scheme for the financial year 2026/2027.

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the report. Councillor Smith stated that the Council was required to review its Council Tax Support Scheme yearly. Councillor Smith stated that inflation was projected to continue at 3-4% into 2026. It was proposed that the Council Tax Support Scheme bands were adjusted in order to maintain the

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level of support, as otherwise people currently in receipt would no longer qualify due to inflation, this adjustment would prevent them being worse off as a result.

The recommendations would result in a £2,500 reduction in Council tax income to the Council, which was considered to be negligible on balance.

Councillor Andy Graham seconded the recommendations, and these were voted on.

Voting record – For – 39, Abstentions 0, Against 0, Did not vote 1

Resolved: That Council

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

CL.58 Proposals for Devolution to a Mayoral Strategic Authority

The purpose of the report was to provide information on the submission of an Expression of Interest (EOI) to Government. This was in response to the Government's devolution policy and sought to position the region in the next round of devolution for the purpose of creating a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

Councillor Andy Graham introduced the report and explained the proposed Thames Valley Mayoral strategic authority. It was expected that the new strategic authorities would be brought in in Summer/Autumn 2026.

Members discussed the report, raising the following points;

- It was asked who would be signing the letter. As County Council Leader, Councillor Liz Leffman stated that she would be signing it on behalf of Oxfordshire Councils and that Councillor Mary Tempton, Leader of Bracknell Council, would be signing it on behalf of Berkshire.
- A Mayoral Strategic Authority was welcomed as it would enable the councils to bring forward more ambitious projects and have greater representation on a national scale.
- While the expression of interest was welcomed, one member referenced concerns they had with the proposals. In particular, they emphasised the importance democratic representation and engagement and stated that more detail on this was needed.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor Andy Graham and seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright. Councillor Enright stated that there were many examples of successful Mayoral Strategic Authorities, and expressed optimism.

Voting record – For – 39, Abstentions 1, Against 0, Did not vote 0

Resolved: That Council

1. Noted the benefits from the proposed devolution of powers and functions, and agree to continue building on the collaborative approach across the region to date;
2. Agreed to present views to the Executive on the proposed Expression of Interest (EOI) to be submitted by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) as the upper-tier authority to Government, noting that the EOI is designed to proactively position our region for early consideration in the next wave of the Devolution Programme;
3. Acknowledged the EOI as an initial invitation to Government, opening further dialogue and engagement, and not a decision to establish a Strategic Authority;
4. Noted that a further report will be brought to Council prior to any final decision on the creation of a Strategic Authority;
5. Noted the informal Devolution Board will oversee discussions with Government, ensuring robust governance and stakeholder engagement by elected members throughout this process.

CL.59 Appointment of Independent Member of the Audit and Governance Committee

Councillor Jane Doughty took advice from the Monitoring Officer and left the Chamber having declared an interest.

As Chair of the Audit and Governance Committee, Councillor Carl Rylett introduced the report and proposed the recommendation. Councillor Rylett stated that the Audit and Governance Committee had two Independent Members, and following the resignation of one, they were seeking to appoint a replacement. Councillor Rylett stated that the scheme had been in place for a year, and had produced good input.

Councillor Ruth Smith seconded the proposal and welcomed the appointment of a woman, referring the importance of equal representation in the public sector.

Resolved: That Council

1. Appointed Victoria Field to the Council's Audit & Governance Committee as an Independent Member for the remainder of the 4-year term ending on 25 September 2028.

Voting record – For 38 Against 0, Abstentions 1, did not vote 1

CL.60 Constitution Working Group Recommendations

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The purpose of the report was to consider the recommendations made by the Constitution Working Group (CWG) on 19 November 2025. Councillor Alaric Smith introduced the report and proposed the recommendations. Councillor Smith explained that the CWG had put forward two recommendations, which were to amend Part 3C of the Constitution (Terms of Reference for the Audit and Governance Committee) and to remove “special meetings” from Rule 5 of the Council procedure rules (Part 5A).

Members discussed the report and raised a point of clarity on which section of the terms of reference would be amended as there was a typographical error within the annex. It was explained that this would be corrected.

The proposals were seconded by Andy Graham, put to the vote and agreed by Council

Resolved: That Council

1. Agreed the amendment (shown in Annex A, as amended) to Part 3C of the Constitution Audit and Governance terms of reference following a recommendation from the Council’s external auditor that the Council clarifies, within its Constitution, the responsibility for the assessment of the Council's Capital, Investment and Treasury Management Strategies as part of the annual budget setting process.
2. Agreed to remove Rule 5 of the Council Procedure Rules “Special meetings” as well as any other reference to special meetings.

Voting record – 39 for, 0 against, 1 abstentions

CL.61 Programme of Meetings 2026/27

The purpose of the report was to invite Council to set a programme of Council and Committee meetings for the civic year 2026–2027. Councillor Andy Graham introduced the report and stated that the same pattern was followed as previous years but delegations were included to make subsequent changes or schedule additional meetings.

Members discussed the report, raising the following points;

- The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny stated that on page 103 stated that reports would sometimes need to be to follow for Overview and Scrutiny, and asked that this be avoided wherever possible.
- Why there were n meetings in May. The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services explained that this was due to elections taking place then.

The report was seconded by Councillor Alaric Smith and put to a vote.

Resolved: That Council

1. Approved the Programme of Meetings for 2026/27, as detailed at Annex A and Annex B;
2. Delegated authority to the Director of Governance and Regulatory Services, in consultation with Group Leaders, to make changes to the programme of meetings, in the event that there is any future decision of the Council to change the committee structure, frequencies of committees or sub-committees, or committee remits that impacts the programme of meetings;
3. Delegated authority to the Democratic Services Business Manager to set meeting dates for committees and sub-committees that meet on an ad-hoc basis (Performance and Appointments Committee, Development Control Committee, Licensing Committee, Licensing Panel, Miscellaneous Licensing Sub-Committee, Standards Sub-Committee), member training, member briefing sessions, and any further working groups established by the Council.
4. Noted that the Council Procedure Rules (Part 5A of the Constitution) allows each committee to set its own start time.

For 39, Against 0, Abstentions 1

Council took a 12 minute break at this point.

CL.62 Motion A: Protecting Fire Services in West Oxfordshire

Councillor Liam Walker introduced the motion he was proposing on behalf of the Conservative Group. The motion was as follows;

Council notes:

1. That Oxfordshire County Council is currently considering proposals that include the potential closure of *two* on-call fire stations within West Oxfordshire: Eynsham Fire Station and Woodstock Fire Station.
2. That both stations provide vital emergency response capability for their communities and surrounding areas, and their crews contribute significantly to safeguarding residents, businesses, heritage assets, and critical transport infrastructure.
3. That West Oxfordshire is a growing district, with new housing developments, increased traffic volumes, and expanding commercial activity—all of which place greater, not lesser, demand on local emergency response capacity.

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4. That the loss of either station could risk slower response times, reduced local resilience, and diminished fire cover for incidents such as road traffic collisions, flooding, and property fires.

Council believes:

1. That maintaining strong, localised fire and rescue provision is essential for community safety and public confidence.
2. That any reduction in fire cover within West Oxfordshire is unacceptable and would represent a step backwards in protecting residents, especially in rural and semi-rural areas.
3. That decisions on fire station closures must prioritise public safety above financial or administrative considerations.

Council therefore resolves to:

1. Formally oppose the proposed closure of Eynsham and Woodstock Fire Stations.
2. Ask the Council Leader write to the Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing and Safety urging her to withdraw the proposals and to commit to maintaining full operational status at both stations.
3. Support local firefighters and residents in campaigning to retain emergency fire cover in West Oxfordshire.

Councillor Walker stated that he would be altering his motion in order to refer the motion to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. At this point there was a discussion over whether that would preclude the Council from debating the motion. This was due to perceived ambiguity over Council procedure rule 13.6 which stated “If the subject matter of any motion of which notice has been given falls within the remit of any Committee of the Council, or of the Executive, when it has been proposed and seconded it shall stand referred without discussion to that Committee or the Executive.”

The Chair took another break for ten minutes in order to seek advice from the Monitoring Officer. Upon reconvening the meeting the Chair explained that the alteration would be voted on in the first instance.

The alteration was debated and it was felt by some that the motion no longer made sense as altered. The alteration was accepted by the seconder, councillor Nick Leverton and was voted on as follows.

Voting record – Against 27, For 11, Abstentions 2

The alteration fell.

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It was stated that rule 13.6 should be reviewed by the Constitution Working Group to ensure clarity.

Councillor Alaric Smith then proposed referring the motion to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It was clarified that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would then be responsible for determining what, if any, action to take in relation to the motion. This was seconded by Councillor Ruth Smith and Voted on.

Voting record – For 39, Abstentions 0

Resolved: To refer the motion to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and for the Committee to determine whether action is to be taken by the Council.

Before closing the meeting, the Chair wished the Council a Merry Christmas.

The Meeting closed at 3.53 pm

CHAIR