

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, 7 January 2026**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Genny Early (Vice-Chair), Steve Cosier, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Paul Marsh, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, Ruth Smith, Alex Wilson, Carl Rylett and Julian Cooper

Officers: Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Giles Hughes (Chief Executive Officer) and Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Other Councillors in attendance: Andy Graham, Sarah Veasey and Liam Walker

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Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments

Apologies were noted from Councillors Adam Clements, Natalie King, Mark Walker and Alistair Wray.

Councillor Julian Cooper substituted for Councillor Adam Clements and Councillor Carl Rylett substituted for Councillor Alistair Wray.

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Declarations of Interest

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Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Genny Early commented that she hoped the question raised on the Windrush in Witney project would be taken forward soon.

The approval of the minutes was proposed by Councillor Wilson and seconded by Councillor Cosier, put to the vote and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 10 December 2025 as an accurate record.

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Chair's announcements

The Chair announced that an informal meeting would be taking in February to consider the Committee's work plan for the year ahead.

The Chair also suggested bringing the main item of business forward on the agenda to follow participation of the public.

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Participation of the Public

Councillor Andy Graham addressed the Committee in his capacity as County Councillor for Woodstock in relation to fire services in West Oxfordshire. Councillor Graham thanked the professionalism of staff involved in delivering fire services and made the following points:

- Local fire stations provided reassurance and security for the public.
- The overriding issue for the Committee to consider was whether the proposals would enhance public safety and improve response times. If not then the proposals should be challenged and improvements sought.
- The Committee may wish to consider response time modelling, service resilience, impacts on recruitment and retention and impacts on rural communities.
- Change was not necessarily negative, but benefits needed to be demonstrated and not assumed.

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Report back on recommendations

The Committee noted the Executive's responses to the Committee's recommendation relating to the Waste and Environmental Services Programme.

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Updates from Task and Finish Groups

There was no update since the previous meeting.

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Motion A Protecting Fire Services in West Oxfordshire - Referred from Council 3 December

This item was to consider the motion titled "Protecting Fire Services in West Oxfordshire", which had been referred to the Committee by full Council on 3 December 2025. Council had authorised the Committee to determine what (if any) action to take on behalf of the Council.

The Chair explained that the item would be approached in the following order:

- Cllr Liam Walker would be invited to present his motion.
- The Chief Fire Officer would be invited to present the County Council's consultation proposals.
- The Committee would ask questions of the Chief Fire Officer.
- The Committee would consider its response to the County Council's consultation.

Councillor Liam Walker explained that it hadn't been his intention to bring this matter to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee but he hoped the Committee would be able to consider the issues in detail and put a strong case to the County Council on behalf of residents of West Oxfordshire. The consultation would be open until 20 January 2026 and residents were encouraged to respond to it. There was an opportunity to seek delay given uncertainties around the location of any new fire station, where fire services would sit within future local

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government structures, and concerns around fire fighters losing their jobs and homes linked to their jobs.

Rob McDougall, Chief Fire Officer, introduced the County Council's proposals for improving fire services and said that:

- The aim was to seek to improve fire services for communities.
- The service was reliant on on-call fire fighters who performed that role in addition to their daily lives and jobs. The challenge around the availability of on call fire fighters was the main issue the proposals were seeking to address.
- The main proposal was to reconfigure resources to move whole time resources into daytime shifts when incidents were highest and on call fire fighters were least available.
- Shifting an engine out of Oxford would improve the service to the districts.
- The proposals would improve average response times for all communities.
- The intention was to move from the aging site at Rewley Road in Oxford city centre to a new site in North Oxford. There was a need to identify a site, seek planning approval and develop the site, so this was medium term aim.
- Day crews based at Kidlington would be impacted but had been given assurances that no one would be made homeless as a result of changes.
- Due to low availability, fire stations at Woodstock, Eynsham and Henley were proposed to be closed. This would have local impacts but the current availability of engines at these stations was only 15-25% due to a lack of fire fighters.
- The workforce had been informed of the proposals first and there had been an orchestrated communications plan. The Unions had been informed a week prior to the proposals being publicly launched.

The Committee asked the Chief Fire Officer a number of questions and from the responses noted that:

- The thinking was that the proposed closures would be contingent on a new fire station becoming operational and 2029 would be an ambitious timeline for delivering that, meaning that any closures would be some years away.
- The availability of more whole-time fire fighters during the day in locations such as Witney and Chipping Norton would improve response times in rural areas. Response times in Oxford City Council would be slightly reduced but Oxford already benefited from very quick response times.
- On call fire fighters would continue to be relied upon at night.
- Specialist capabilities and equipment would continue to be available in future e.g. the welfare unit currently based at Eynsham.
- Flooding response was not a statutory duty for fire services, but was a responsibility that had been taken on by the service in Oxfordshire.

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- An additional four full time fire fighters during the day would increase capacity for prevention work.
- The fire service was used to dealing with events and unexpected challenges such as the closure of Botley Road.
- The existing buildings were adequate but aging and not ideal for current operational requirements, such as dealing with contaminated clothing, hence a new site rather than expansion was being sought.
- Further data had been requested from a modelling company on local response time impacts of increased station availability e.g. at Eynsham.
- The proposals would be deliverable within existing budgets.
- Closures would potentially lead to redundancies, but every effort would be made to redeploy staff.
- The recruitment and retention of on call firefighters was a constant priority. The demands of the initial training requirements on people's time could be a barrier. Recruitment drives continued to take place out in the community as well as on social media.
- A steady decline in on-call availability during the day and reduced response times were driving the need to act now to improve the service. The service was broadly managing to maintain numbers but was losing experienced fire fighters.
- Local Government Reorganisation wasn't considered to be a major issue because fire services were expected to be governed at mayoral strategic authority level in future. The future governance model did not impact the need to improve the operational service model.

The Chief Fire Officer was thanked and left the meeting. After a brief adjournment the Committee discussed the proposals and how to respond to the County Council's consultation. A number of concerns were voiced as well as some supportive comments. A list of the concerns was noted by Democratic Services.

The Committee unanimously agreed to write to thank the Chief Fire Officer for his attendance and time spent answering the Committee's questions.

The Committee unanimously agreed to submit the following list of concerns about the proposals being consulted on to Oxfordshire County Council:

- a) Disproportionate adverse impacts on West Oxfordshire, which stands to potentially lose two fire stations.
- b) A lack of detail on real response time impacts and worst-case response time impacts (rather than average response times) of the proposed closures of Woodstock and Eynsham fire stations on rural communities in West Oxfordshire. Decision makers and residents require more detailed information.

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- c) Recruitment opportunities not being fully explored as an alternative to closures e.g. more outreach to employers.
- d) A lack of information for decision makers on the impact of higher station availability on response times, if stations were to kept open and on-call staffing enhanced.
- e) Housing growth not being fully considered in the report, which will increase the local demand for services and the pool of potential fire fighters over time.
- f) A lack of assurance that a new facility in North Oxford will come forwards.
- g) The need for greater transparency on how proposed changes to staffing patterns (i.e. more full-time fire fighters) will be funded.
- h) Impacts of proposed closures on lives, residents, firefighters, climate change, flood risk, protection of the Blenheim World Heritage site.
- i) Staff morale for on-call firefighters in particular, and potential job losses if closures go ahead.
- j) The overall level of data provided in the consultation and the fact that the investment proposals (E and F) don't have free text boxes unlike the other consultation questions.

Councillor Alex Wilson proposed opposing the implementation of the proposals being consulted on as they currently stood due to the loss of the fire stations in Eynsham and Woodstock. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Julian Cooper, put to the vote and agreed by the Committee on a majority vote.

Councillor Carl Rylett proposed requesting that the implementation of the proposals be deferred until the concerns had been addressed and enough time had been given to exploring the alternatives. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Smith, put to the vote and agreed by the Committee on a majority vote.

RESOLVED: that West Oxfordshire District Council:

1. Agreed to write to thank the Chief Fire Officer for his attendance and time spent answering the Committee's questions.
2. Agreed to oppose the implementation of the proposals being consulted on as they currently stood due to the loss of the fire stations in Eynsham and Woodstock.
3. Agreed to submit the following concerns about the proposals being consulted on to Oxfordshire County Council:
 - a) Disproportionate adverse impacts on West Oxfordshire, which stands to potentially lose two fire stations.
 - b) A lack of detail on real response time impacts and worst-case response time impacts (rather than average response times) of the proposed closures of Woodstock and Eynsham fire stations on rural communities in West Oxfordshire. Decision makers and residents require more detailed information.
 - c) Recruitment opportunities not being fully explored as an alternative to closures e.g. more outreach to employers.

- d) A lack of information for decision makers on the impact of higher station availability on response times, if stations were to kept open and on-call staffing enhanced.
- e) Housing growth not being fully considered in the report, which will increase the local demand for services and the pool of potential fire fighters over time.
- f) A lack of assurance that a new facility in North Oxford will come forwards.
- g) The need for greater transparency on how proposed changes to staffing patterns (i.e. more full-time fire fighters) will be funded.
- h) Impacts of proposed closures on lives, residents, firefighters, climate change, flood risk, protection of the Blenheim World Heritage site.
- i) Staff morale for on-call firefighters in particular, and potential job losses if closures go ahead.
- j) The overall level of data provided in the consultation and the fact that the investment proposals (E and F) don't have free text boxes unlike the other consultation questions.

4. Agreed to request that the implementation of the proposals be deferred until the concerns have been addressed and enough time has been given to exploring the alternatives.

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Executive Work Programme

The Committee noted that the Executive report on Woodford Way had not been ready for pre-decision scrutiny the January Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting but that an update paper would come forwards to the Committee in March.

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Committee Work Programme

The Committee noted that, following a request at the previous meeting, an Executive report on the government's National Planning Policy Framework consultation had been added to the work plan for March.

The Chair suggested, and the Committee agreed, to hold an additional meeting in March to enable the Committee to complete the remaining work plan items within the current civic year.

The Meeting closed at Time Not Specified

CHAIR