

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Council

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB
at 2.15 pm on **Wednesday, 22 July 2026**

PRESENT

Councillors: Carl Rylett (Chair), Joy Aitman (Vice-Chair), Tammy Abarno, Thomas Ashby, Andrew Beaney, Adam Clements, Sandra Coleman, Andrew Coles, Rachel Crouch, Duncan Enright, Sarah Evans, Roger Faulkner, Nick Field-Johnson, Phil Godfrey, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Liz Leffman, Dan Levy, Jan Lund, Andrew Lyon, Liam Mackenzie, Stuart McCarroll, Paul Marsh, Hannah Massie, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Elizabeth Poskitt, Andrew Prosser, Nigel Ridpath, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Tim Sumner, Jack Treloar, Sarah Veasey, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Simon Watson, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray

Officers: Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance and Regulatory Services), Phil Martin (Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service), Frank Wilson (Managing Director - Publica), Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer), Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant), Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and Chris Hargraves (Head of Planning)

Other Councillors in attendance:

CL.124 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors:

Sandra Cosier
Steve Cosier
Jane Doughty
Genny Early
Phil Godfrey
Andrew Lyon
Toby Morris
James Robertshaw

CL.125 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

The Chair explained that Motion C was related to management fees at privately managed estates and explained that any members who were subject to such fees may wish to declare that for transparency.

Councillors Liam Walker and Stuart McCarroll both declared that they live on new estates but that they were approaching the debate with an open mind.

CL.126 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 May were considered.

Councillor Liam Walker raised a correction regarding page 10 explaining that there were 2 votes against which had been omitted from the minutes.

The amended minutes were proposed by Councillor Andy Graham and seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright.

CL.127 Receipt of Announcements

The Chair made the following announcements;

- The Chair's civic year would focus on supporting young people, particularly those facing additional challenges. His chosen charities were Against the Grain and APCAM, both of which worked to support young people and families affected by special educational and mental health needs.
- Members were invited to attend an event organised by the Eynsham Nature Recovery Network on 5 September 2026, highlighting its work to restore biodiversity and recreate ancient floodplain meadows along the River Thames.
- Members were asked to complete training surveys and review their Register of Interests forms, returning any updates to Democratic Services.

The Leader made the following announcements;

- Council was updated on the Government's decision regarding local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire. The Leader stated that, while this was not the Council's preferred outcome, the Council would work constructively through the transition, continuing to deliver services, support staff, and seek governance arrangements that reflected the needs of West Oxfordshire's communities. Members were also reminded of the upcoming Local Government Reorganisation briefing.
- Councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire had received the Structural Change Order letter, which set out details relating to the new authorities, councillor numbers, implementation arrangements and the timetable for formal legislation.

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- Council was informed of the death of Lawrence King, Lead Shared Flood Risk Manager, who had died after a short illness. Council paid tribute to his significant contribution to flood risk management and his service to the Council. Council observed a minute's silence in his memory.

The Executive Member for Climate Action announced that the Climate Team had produced two new guidance documents on climate adaptation and staying safe during hot weather. The guides had been shared with town and parish councils and made available on the Council's website.

CL.128 Participation of the Public

Adrian Bullock, the Chair of the Witney and District Chamber of Commerce had submitted a public statement. As he was unable to attend the meeting, the statement was read out by the Senior Democratic Services Officer. The statement was;

“Since March we have called for anonymised ANPR cameras in all three of the town's main car parks. The data published for the Woodford Way development was years old, incomplete, and gave no reliable picture of how Woodford Way or Marriotts car parks are actually used. The project team and several councillors supported our call at the time. ANPR records entry and exit times anonymously. It tells us exactly how long people stay, and how full each car park is, by day and hour. No guesswork. That data matters well beyond Woodford Way. Combined with footfall monitoring, it shows who uses the town centre, when, and how – exactly what we need to plan parking provision and to target our "Welcome to Witney" marketing. It also answers the key capacity question: is our mix of short, medium and long-stay spaces right? Without ANPR, every parking decision is guesswork. Guesswork costs the town - and thus the council - money. We fully support the motion for ANPR assessment of Woodford Way and Witan Way car park usage.”

CL.129 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, Written Answers, Verbal Supplementary Questions and Verbal Supplementary Answers are detailed in a separate document appended to the Minutes of the Meeting.

CL.130 2025/26 Quarterly Finance Review Q4

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Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the report. The purpose of the item was to report the financial performance of the Council in 2025/26.

Councillor Smith included the following in his introduction;

- That the Council had a positive year-end position with a £203,000 surplus, an improvement on the budgeted forecast. Cllr Smith attributed this to strong income performance, higher-than-expected investment returns, and reduced costs in several areas.
- The surplus had enabled the Council to strengthen its financial resilience through contributions to earmarked reserves, including funding for local government reorganisation, waste and environmental services improvements, asset maintenance, hardship support schemes, and affordable housing initiatives.
- There had been progress in delivering the capital programme, including investment in temporary accommodation, while it was acknowledged that some projects had been reprofiled into the following financial year.
- Although the outturn was positive, significant medium-term financial challenges remained and continued financial discipline would be required. The Council was in a strong position to support residents' interests during the local government reorganisation process.

The Executive Member commended the report to Council.

Another member of the Executive highlighted the success of the Council's investment in town centres, noting increased usage and positive performance of the Witney and Chipping Norton markets under the new operator. They also reported continued strong performance at Marriotts Walk, which had generated a significant financial contribution to support Council services and increased footfall in Witney town centre.

Councillor Andy Graham seconded the recommendations within the report, which were put to a vote and agreed.

Council resolved to:

1. Agree to carry forward the capital budget of £4,395,180. (Paragraph 5.2);
2. Approve the transfers to and between Earmarked Reserves as detailed in the report (Section 4);
3. Approve the necessary budget virements related to Publica Phase 2. (Paragraph 2.27).

For 38, Abstention 1, Against 0

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CL.131 Appointments to Outside Bodies 2026-27

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report and advised that it set out the annual appointments to outside bodies for 2026/27.

He noted that the appointments followed the Council's established annual process and moved the recommendation to note the appointments listed in Annex A.

No further comments were made by Members.

The recommendation was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright.

Council resolved to:

- I. Note the appointments to outside bodies as set out in Annex A.

Voting record - For 40 , 0 against, 0 abstentions

CL.132 Allocation of Capital Funding For Lift Replacement at Marriotts Walk

The purpose of the item was to request approval of the allocation of part of the building maintenance earmarked reserves for the replacement of the lifts at Marriotts Walk, Witney.

Council considered a report seeking approval to use funding from the Building Maintenance Earmarked Reserve to replace the lifts at Marriotts Walk, Witney. Members agreed to consider the item in public session as there was no need to refer to the exempt annex.

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the report and explained that the lifts, installed when the centre was built in 2009, were approaching the end of their operational life. Specialist advice and a condition survey had concluded that replacement was the most cost-effective option, as the lifts were becoming obsolete and upgrades or partial repairs would not provide good value for money.

Members discussed the report, noting the following points:

- As the Council was the Landlord to Marriott's Walk, it was responsible for maintaining the centre, including meeting health and safety requirements. The proposed works would support the continued regeneration and success of the shopping centre.
- The expenditure was an unavoidable but necessary investment in maintaining Council assets.
- The investment was welcome and Members cited feedback from residents regarding the lifts and the importance of ensuring accessibility as use of the area increased.

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In summing up, Councillor Smith reiterated the Council's responsibility to maintain the centre and ensure facilities remained safe, efficient and attractive to visitors.

Councillor Andy Graham seconded the proposal and it was put to a vote and agreed by Council.

Council Resolved to:

- I. Agree to allocate funding from earmarked reserves to replace the lifts at Marriotts Walk.

For 40, 0 against 0 abstentions

CL.133 Approval of Regulation 19 Draft Submission Local Plan for Public Consultation

Cllr Enright declared an interest as he worked in the planning and development industry and left the room for the remainder of the item.

Councillor Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report and proposed the recommendations, explaining that Council was not being asked to adopt the Local Plan but to approve the Regulation 19 draft for statutory public consultation prior to submission for independent examination.

Councillor Leffman, Executive Member for Planning and Infrastructure, seconded the recommendations and outlined the purpose of the Local Plan, noting that it would guide development in West Oxfordshire to 2043, including housing, employment, infrastructure, environmental protection, transport, healthcare, education and community facilities. The Executive Member emphasised that the plan was evidence-based, infrastructure-led, supported by extensive technical studies and had been shaped through significant public engagement over several years.

In debate, Members raised the following points;

- The Regulation 19 consultation would focus on the legal compliance and soundness of the plan before it was submitted for examination by the Planning Inspectorate.
- The work undertaken on the plan was welcome.
- There were concerns that the Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP) had not been published at this stage. Concerns were expressed regarding the ability of Members and the public to scrutinise infrastructure requirements before the consultation commenced.
- The IDP was a supporting technical document that would be published as part of the Regulation 19 consultation package. The Leader confirmed that it would be reviewed by the Executive Member for Planning and Infrastructure, and by the Executive, before

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publication. He also stated that concerns relating to infrastructure could be raised through the consultation process and considered as part of the independent examination.

- Additional concerns were raised regarding the consultation timetable and the potential impact of the summer holiday period on responses from parish and town councils.

In summing up, Councillor Graham thanked members for their comments and concluded by emphasising that the decision related to progressing to the next statutory stage of the plan-making process and would enable residents, businesses and stakeholders to submit representations before examination by an independent Planning Inspector.

The recommendations were put to the vote and agreed by Council.

Council resolved to:

1. Approve the pre-submission draft Local Plan attached at Annex A for the purposes of formal publication for a statutory period of at least 6-weeks in accordance with Regulation 19 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012.
2. Delegate authority to the Head of Planning, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Infrastructure, to make any necessary minor textual and presentational amendments, and any amendments necessary to reflect any agreed Overview and Scrutiny recommendations, to the pre-submission draft Local Plan, prior to formal publication.

For 25 against 3 abstain 11

CL.134 Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2025/26

The item was proposed by Councillor Andrew Beaney and seconded by Councillor.

The report was moved without debate and put to a vote.

Council resolved to:

1. Note the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2025/26.

For 35, Against 0, Abstentions 0

CL.135 National Scheme of Delegation of Planning Functions

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Councillor Liz Leffman, Executive Member for Planning and Infrastructure, proposed the report, which was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council.

The report was discussed, during which a member suggested that the proposals also be taken to the Strategic Planning Committee. Both the proposer and seconder agreed to this and that the recommendation was amended to read “Request that the Constitution Working Group and the **Strategic Planning Committee** further consider the implications of the new Regulations and how they need to be reflected in any changes to the Council’s Constitution, prior to the Regulations coming into effect on 31 October 2026.”

The recommendations were put to the vote and agreed by Council.

Council resolved to:

1. Note the report;
2. Request that the Constitution Working Group further consider the implications of the new Regulations and how they need to be reflected in any changes to the Council’s Constitution, prior to the Regulations coming into effect on 31 October 2026.

Voting record- For 39, Abstentions 1, Against 0

CL.136 Motion A: Protecting precious habitats in West Oxfordshire; Proposed by Cllr Alistair Wray, seconded by Cllr Rosie Pearson

Councillor Alistair Wray introduced the motion, and read it out as follows;

“This Council notes:

- The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world; with only about 50% of its biodiversity remaining, it ranks in the bottom 10% globally. It is therefore of utmost importance that the remaining areas of high ecological value are preserved, as they may serve as nucleation sites for the wider nature recovery.
- This is also a matter of urgency. The new Planning and Infrastructure Bill has been created to fast-track the delivery of the government’s ambition to build 1.5 million homes by the end of this parliament. This bill allows developers to meet their environmental obligations by making payments to the Nature Restoration Fund to promote nature restoration elsewhere.
- Scientists, wildlife trusts and ecologists are deeply concerned that this new strategy will encourage developers to damage the environment locally and simply ‘make up for it miles away’. According to legal analysis of the legislation, more than 5,000 of England’s most sensitive and rare natural habitats are at high risk.

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are areas of exceptional ecological or geological value that have legal protection. Their designation is one of the most important tools available for protecting the UK's most valuable habitats and species. Designation and management of SSSIs is one of Natural England's key statutory duties, which the Agency seems to be failing to fulfil. The rate of SSSI designations has slowed dramatically in recent years; the average time it takes to designate sites is getting longer. According to experts familiar with the matter, it takes up to 10 years to obtain an SSSI status. Moreover, it now appears that the Agency has suspended processing further designations altogether.
- We have some sites with extraordinary habitats, such as floodplain meadows and ancient woodlands in West Oxfordshire. Our SSSIs include: Alvescot Meadows, Cassington Meadows, Ditchley Road Quarry, Glyme Valley and Middle Barton Fen. They require legal protection. The Council has a legal duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity, and one of our priorities is to "create a better environment for people and wildlife".
- Given the rapid pace of housing development and the current shortcomings of the Natural England watchdog, the Council should stand up for the local environment and demand answers and actions from the Agency.

The council resolves to:

1. Ask the Leader of the Council to write to Tony Juniper, the head of Natural England, to ask:

- a) Why the SSSI designation process has been suspended
 - b) When the SSSI designation will be reinstated
 - c) Request that Natural England adopt a temporary approach to commenting on planning applications, which takes into account available local environmental evidence to protect the sites that would otherwise have been designated as SSSIs if the designation process worked as intended.
 - d) Request that Natural England use this approach until the backlog in the SSSI designation is cleared.
3. Send a copy of the letter to Emma Reynolds MP, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)."

Members debated the motion, raising the following points;

- The motion should be amended to reflect that since the motion had been published with the agenda, the Secretary of State had changed and was now The Rt Hon Dame Angela Eagle, DBE MP
- It was important to balance environmental protection with the need for housing development. It was noted that SSSIs play a vital role in protecting important wildlife and geological sites, while the need to meet local housing needs was also recognised.

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- Members expressed support for seeking clarification from Natural England regarding the designation process for new SSSIs and the ongoing monitoring and protection of existing sites.
- Environmental protection and development should not be viewed as competing objectives, and sustainable growth should be delivered alongside the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity.

The motion was seconded by Councillor Rosie Pearson who stated that SSSIs were crucial to protect and underlined the importance of the motion.

The motion was put to a vote, as amended regarding the change of the Secretary of State.

Voting record: For 40, Against, Abstentions 0

Council resolved to:

1. Ask the Leader of the Council to write to Tony Juniper, the head of Natural England, to ask:
 - a) Why the SSSI designation process has been suspended
 - b) When the SSSI designation will be reinstated
 - c) Request that Natural England adopt a temporary approach to commenting on planning applications, which takes into account available local environmental evidence to protect the sites that would otherwise have been designated as SSSIs if the designation process worked as intended.
 - d) Request that Natural England use this approach until the backlog in the SSSI designation is cleared.
2. Send a copy of the letter to The Rt Hon Dame Angela Eagle DBE MP, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

CL.137 Motion B: ANPR Assessment of Woodford Way and Witan Way Car Park Usage; Proposed by Cllr Liam Walker, seconded by Cllr Jack Treloar

Stuart McCarroll left the meeting at this point.

Cllr Liam Walker introduced the motion, which was as follows;

“Council notes that:

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1. West Oxfordshire District Council is progressing proposals that could result in the redevelopment of part of the Woodford Way car park in Witney.
2. Woodford Way and Witan Way are two of the town's principal public car parks and play an important role in supporting local businesses, visitors, commuters and the town centre economy.
3. Decisions regarding the future of public parking should be based on robust, comprehensive and up-to-date evidence rather than limited occupancy surveys undertaken over a small number of days or at specific times.
4. Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology is widely used by local authorities to provide detailed information on vehicle movements, duration of stay, occupancy levels and peak demand over an extended period.
5. Collecting data over a minimum five-week period would ensure weekday, weekend, school holiday and event-related parking patterns are properly understood before any irreversible decisions are taken.
6. Residents, businesses, and town centre stakeholders rightly expect major planning decisions affecting public infrastructure to be supported by transparent and reliable evidence.

Council believes that:

1. Any proposal that could reduce public parking capacity should only proceed once there is a clear and independently verifiable understanding of existing demand.
2. A minimum five-week ANPR survey would provide a far more accurate picture of parking usage than short-term manual surveys and would improve confidence in any subsequent planning application.
3. Better evidence will lead to better decision-making and help ensure that the economic vitality of Witney town centre is not inadvertently harmed.

Council therefore resolves to:

1. Request that the Executive Member for Environment commissions the installation of temporary ANPR cameras at both the Woodford Way and Witan Way public car parks.
2. Ensure that the monitoring is undertaken continuously for a minimum period of five weeks before any planning application relating to the redevelopment of Woodford Way car park is submitted.
3. Publish the resulting occupancy, including existing data from Marriott's Walk car park, turnover and parking duration data for the three car parks in full, together with an accompanying analysis, so that councillors, residents, and businesses can properly scrutinise the evidence."

In introducing the motion, Councillor Walker stated that a previous proposal for a trial had not been accepted by the Executive. Cllr Walker stated that parking was difficult to replace

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once removed and explained that the purpose of the motion was to improve evidence available to improve the decision-making in this regard.

Cllr Jack Treloar seconded the motion, welcoming the public participation statement which had been submitted by Adrian Bullock and was in support of the motion in an earlier part of the meeting. Cllr Treloar called parking in the town one of the most vital pieces of strategic infrastructure and urged members to support the motion.

Members debated the motion, raising the following points;

- The Executive member advised that a five-week survey would not provide sufficiently representative data due to seasonal variations, school holidays and temporary changes affecting parking patterns. He also noted that detailed data was already available for Marriotts Walk car park and would be reported to Members.
- Several Members supported the principle of gathering evidence but questioned whether the proposed survey would provide meaningful additional information, particularly given ongoing town centre works and existing parking data. Concerns were also raised that the motion could delay proposals to deliver affordable housing on Council-owned land at Woodford Way.
- Other Members spoke in support of the motion, arguing that residents and businesses expected decisions of this scale to be supported by robust and up-to-date parking data.

In summing up, Councillor Walker maintained that further evidence was required before progressing development proposals and argued that decisions should be based on comprehensive parking usage data.

The motion was voted on, and fell.

Voting record- for 14, against 24, abstention 1

CL.138 Motion C: Ending the "Double Taxation" of Managed Housing Estates; Proposed by Cllr Thomas Ashby, seconded by Cllr Liam MacKenzie

Councillor Thomas Ashby introduced a motion addressing concerns that residents on newer housing estates were paying both council tax and private estate management charges. The motion was as follows;

“The Council Notes That:

- Many residents across West Oxfordshire, including those in newer developments in my area, are subject to a system of ‘double taxation’

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- These residents are legally required to pay their full council tax to local authorities, whilst simultaneously paying mandatory, escalating estate management fees to private companies to maintain public green spaces
- This creates an unfair, two-tier system where residents on unadopted estates pay significantly more for the same or lesser council services than those living on traditionally adopted council-maintained estates
- The current model of leaving public open spaces in perpetuity under private management companies leads to poor accountability, high administration charges, and a lack of democratic oversight

The Council Believes That:

- Public spaces on new housing developments should be viewed as community assets for all residents, and their maintenance should be the democratically accountable to local authorities
- It is fundamentally unjust to charge residents full Council Tax if a local authority is not adopting or maintaining the immediate public open space surrounding their homes"

The Council Resolves To:

Adopt a Default Adoption Policy:

1. Ask the Executive and Planning Department to review local planning frameworks, including the Local Plan, to ensure that, moving forward, all new housing estates in the district are adopted by the local authority as a matter of default, provided they meet the standard adoption criteria

Explorer Adoption of Existing Facilities:

2. Set up a cross-party working group to investigate the financial and legal mechanisms required for the Council to adopt existing managed estates, freeing residents from private maintenance contracts

Lobby for Council Tax Relief

3. Ask the Leader of the Council to write to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and local Members of Parliament, calling for a change in national policy to allow local authorities to legally offer a Council Tax discount or rebate to residents who are forced to pay private estate management fees for unadopted public infrastructure.

Investigate Interim Discretionary Relief:

4. Ask the Executive to request that officers to produce a report on whether any temporary, local discretionary Council Tax relief or hardship schemes can be applied under existing legislation to mitigate the financial burden on affected residents in the interim."

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Councillor Graham expressed support for the principle of the motion but proposed that it be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He advised that the issues raised were complex, involving financial, legal and policy considerations, and would benefit from detailed examination with officer and legal support.

Councillor Enright supported referring the motion to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, noting that concerns about estate management charges had been raised previously and that a task and finish group was expected to consider the issue alongside relevant Local Plan and national legislative developments.

The proposer and seconder agreed to the amendment to refer the matter for further investigation, and this was put to a vote and agreed by Council.

Council resolved to:

- I. Refer the motion to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for detailed consideration and review.

38 votes for, 0 against, 0 abstentions

The Chair closed meeting at 16:37

CL.139 Exclusion of Public and Press

Exempt Annex A for item 9: Allocation of Capital Funding for Lift Replacement at Marriotts Walk was not discussed, therefore the Council did not have a need to exclude the press and public from the meeting.

CL.140 Exempt Annex A for item 9: Allocation of Capital Funding for Lift Replacement at Marriotts Walk

This exempt annex was taken as read in the public part of the meeting and was not discussed.

The Meeting closed at Time Not Specified

CHAIR