

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, 29 January 2025**

PRESENT

Councillors: Elizabeth Poskitt (Chair), Andrew Coles (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Lidia Arciszewska, Hugo Ashton, Mike Baggaley, Andrew Beaney, Michael Brooker, Adam Clements, Julian Cooper, Steve Cosier, Rachel Crouch, Jane Doughty, Genny Early, Duncan Enright, Roger Faulkner, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Charlie Maynard, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Andrew Prosser, Nigel Ridpath, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Tim Sumner, Sarah Veasey, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Adrian Walsh, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray

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

CL.214 Minutes of Previous Meeting

In introducing the meeting, the Chair welcomed any members of the public and explained that an extraordinary meeting of full Council would also held on the rising of the ordinary meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 November were considered, on CL.205 it was stated that the minutes should read 'Bradwell Village' instead of 'Bradwell Grove'. There were also amendments to CL.206 to clarify that an initial proposal on the meeting times had been considered. Councillor Andy Graham proposed accepting the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting subject to the amendments.

Upon being seconded the minutes were voted on and approved unanimously.

Resolved: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2025 as an accurate record of the meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2024 were considered. Councillor Michelle Mead proposed accepting the minutes, this was seconded by Councillor Graham.

Resolved: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2025 as an accurate record of the meeting.

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CL.215 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from: Thomas Ashby, Carl Rylett and Martin McBride.

CL.216 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

CL.217 Receipt of Announcements

The Chair announced that Gill Hill, who had previously been the ward member for Hailey, Minster Lovell, and Leafield, had sadly passed away, and expressed the Council's condolences to her family. The Chair invited Members to speak. She was remembered for her work on the Council and for her personality. The Council held a minute of silence in remembrance.

In other announcements, the Chair provided an overview of the civic events that she had attended recently, which included carol services and chair's dinners. The Chair also highlighted the Holocaust Memorial event that she had attended earlier that week.

The Chair thanked members for their contributions to her jam and chutney sale which had raised over £300 for local charities. The Chair explained that raffle tickets were being sold prior to her reception in Woodstock later in the week in aid of local charities and that there would be a fund raising quiz being held at Woodgreen on 7 March.

The Vice-Chair announced that he had attended a special service of installation and induction of the Reverend Dr. Hester Jones as the new Team Rector of the Benefice of Witney. Reverend Dr. Jones was succeeding the Reverend Canon Toby Wright, who was remembered fondly.

The Leader explained that after the Government's devolution and local government reform proposals were announced, work was being undertaken with other authorities to discuss what this would look like in Oxfordshire. The Leader thanked the Chief Executive for the Member briefing that he'd presented the week prior, and explained that Democratic Services would provide the slides to anyone who had not been able to attend this.

The Chief Executive announced that an Overview and Scrutiny Self-Assessment questionnaire had been sent by Democratic Services and encouraged members and officers to complete it by the closing date of Friday 21 February.

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CL.218 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

CL.219 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 Member 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.220 Recommendations from the Executive

The purpose of the item was to receive and consider recommendations made by the Executive in the period since 27 November 2024. The recommendation in the report was that these be adopted, as set out in Appendix A to the report.

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, proposed accepting the recommendations on the Draft Budget 2025/26. Councillor Alaric Smith, the Executive Member for Finance, seconded the recommendations, and explained that the purpose of the decision was to approve the council tax base, and authorise the section 151 Officer to submit the national non-domestic tax return ahead of the budget being agreed at February’s full Council meeting.

A member stated the first recommendation should read “48,742.33” not “£48,742.33”. The recommendations were moved as amended.

Resolved: That Council:

- I. Approve the Council Tax Base shown in Annex D, calculated as 48,742.33 for the year 2025/26.

Recommendations from the Executive: Draft Budget 2025/26 (Resolution)		
For	Councillor Joy Aitman, Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Councillor Hugo Ashton, Councillor Mike Baggaley, Councillor Andrew Beaney, Councillor Michael Brooker, Councillor Adam Clements, Councillor Andrew Coles, Councillor Julian Cooper, Councillor Steve Cosier, Councillor Rachel Crouch, Councillor Jane Doughty, Councillor Genny Early, Councillor	44

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	Duncan Enright, Councillor Roger Faulkner, Councillor Phil Godfrey, Councillor Andy Goodwin, Councillor Andy Graham, Councillor Edward James, Councillor David Jackson, Councillor Natalie King, Councillor Nick Leverton, Councillor Dan Levy, Councillor Andrew Lyon, Councillor Paul Marsh, Councillor Charlie Maynard, Councillor Stuart McCarroll, Councillor Michele Mead, Councillor David Melvin, Councillor Rosie Pearson, Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, Councillor Andrew Prosser, Councillor Nigel Ridpath, Councillor Geoff Saul, Councillor Sandra Simpson, Councillor Alaric Smith, Councillor Ruth Smith, Councillor Tim Sumner, Councillor Sarah Veasey, Councillor Liam Walker, Councillor Mark Walker, Councillor Adrian Walsh, Councillor Alex Wilson and Councillor Alistair Wray	
Against	None	0
Conflict Of Interests	None	0
Abstain	None	0
Carried		

Voting record – For 44, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 1

Resolved: That Council:

2. Authorise the Director of Finance to submit the National Non-Domestic Rates Return 1 (NNDR1) to Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government by the submission date of 31 January 2025.

Voting record – For 45, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 0

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, proposed accepting the recommendations on the Business Rates Relief: 2025/2026.

The Executive Member for Finance explained that local authorities were expected to use their discretionary relief powers (under section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, as amended) to grant these discounts in line with the relevant eligibility criteria as detailed within Annex A (attached). Councillor Smith explained that the Council would be compensated for the cost of granting these discounts through a section 31 grant from government.

Councillor Duncan Enright seconded the recommendations, which were put to the vote and agreed by Council.

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Resolved: That Council

1. Approve the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure scheme as set out in Annex A for 2025/2026;
2. Delegate authority to the Interim Executive Director for Resident Services for the award of such reliefs

Voting record – For 45, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 0

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, proposed accepting the recommendations on the Waste and Environmental Services Review.

Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, the Executive Member for Environment, seconded the recommendations. Councillor Arciszewska explained that the existing contract was being proposed for extension until March 2027, with a flexibility clause to allow for future changes. Following a feasibility study, the Council was exploring partnerships with other Oxfordshire authorities to save on cost and improve efficiencies.

The Executive Member for Environment was proposing the recommendations be voted on as a block but explained that the order of recommendations 7 and 8 (as they appear in the report) should be swapped.

The Leader also explained that the work laid foundations for a transition to a new unitary authority in the future.

In debating the item, a point was raised on whether the work should be extended to the remaining councils in Oxfordshire. It was stated that the process on the business case would be iterative and may be open to other interested parties in the future.

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

Council resolved to:

1. Note the content of the report and the Activist service review report (see agenda item 11); and
2. Agree to extend the waste and environmental services contract with Ubico to March 2027 (circa £9m per annum); and
3. Agree to inform Ubico of the potential to vary the contract from April 2026 or earlier by mutual consent; and

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4. Agree to undertake a detailed review of all waste and environmental services provided by Ubico; and
5. Delegate Authority to the Council's Director of Finance, in consultation with the Assistant Director Commercial Development, to extend the contract with Ubico and to negotiate any variations to the contract

Voting record – For 45, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 0

CL.221 Council meetings programme 2025/26

The purpose of the item was to invite Council to set a programme of Council and Committee meetings for the civic year 2025–2026.

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, introduced the item and explained that a delegation was being proposed so that, in consultation with group leaders, the Director of Governance could make minor amendments to the programme in the event that there was a need to do so.

Councillor Graham proposed an additional recommendation, which was to move the date of the next meeting of full Council from 26 March 2025 to 19 March 2025, which would avoid the County Council pre-election period.

In discussing the item, a member asked whether the delegations in the recommendations allowed any change in the structure of the Overview and Scrutiny function, making reference to the survey on this. The Leader confirmed that the delegations would allow this to happen without further Full Council approval.

Councillor Duncan Enright seconded the recommendations and welcome the fact that the schedule avoided the school holidays where possible. The recommendations were put to the vote and agreed by Council.

Resolved: that Council

1. Approve the Programme of Meetings for 2025/26, as detailed at Annex A and Annex B;
2. Delegate authority to the Director of Governance, 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. Delegate authority to the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services 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 Subcommittee, Standards Sub-

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Committee), member training, member briefing sessions, and any further working groups established by the Council.

4. Change the date of the Full Council meeting scheduled for 26 March 2025 to 19 March 2025.

Voting record For – 43, Against 0, Abstentions 0, Did not vote 2

CL.222 Motion A: Sewage pollution and Thames Water - Proposed by Councillor Lidia Arciszewska

Cllr Arciszewska proposed the motion, as amended and with a minor alteration explained at the meeting to change the words “above of what the local authority can do” to “beyond the powers of the local authority”.

Councillor Rosie Pearson, seconded the motion as altered by the proposer, Councillor Pearson highlighted personal experiences with sewage issues in her local ward and felt that Thames Water had prioritised financial gain over improving and maintaining infrastructure, particularly in terms of outdated pipes.

The motion being proposed now read as follows:

“In 2024 Thames Water discharged raw sewage from their storm overflow tanks into West Oxfordshire rivers for 27.4 thousand hours, that is a 25% increase on discharges in the previous year and on average 1,600 hours of spilling from each of the WO Sewage Treatment Works. [To put it in perspective 1,400 hrs is equivalent to about two months.] Year on year increasing levels of untreated sewage are being discharged. These spills take place following even slight rain, although TW have permits to discharge raw sewage ONLY under exceptional circumstances.

Consequently, the current ecological status of West Oxfordshire rivers is catastrophic. Once beautiful and bountiful with vibrant life our rivers are now murky, dull and lifeless.

Moreover, we have a number of perennial problem areas in the villages across West Oxfordshire, where sewage notoriously backs up the residents’ toilets, spills into their gardens, roads, public spaces and fields. All because the sewerage network is often overwhelmed following decades of underinvestment.

The Council has committed to reducing sewage pollution of our rivers and waterways and engaged with Thames Water during regular discussions. We have had some great successes.

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However, the problems with Thames Water are fundamental and their resolution is far beyond the powers of the local authority.

Since Thames Water was privatised in 1989, the company has enjoyed great profits, and paid their shareholders, 80% of whom are overseas, some handsome dividends. It has also been rewarding their CEOs with enormous salaries and bonuses. At the same time the company has been 'sweating' the assets and cutting down staff numbers. Moreover, it managed to accumulate £18bn in debts. With this amount of debt the company is in no position to make necessary investments to get our rivers clean. It is estimated that Thames Water needs about £23bn to bring its crumbling infrastructure to the required capacity. The lack of this infrastructure will hold back the ambitions of the government to build the homes that we need.

Thames Water is currently trying to get a further £3bn loan at an eye watering 9.75% interest and with hefty service charges. Just before Christmas OFWAT agreed for the company to increase its customers' bills by 35% by 2030, though most of the increases will take place in the next couple of years. If TW get the loan, 46% of each customer bill payments will be funding Thames Water debt interest payments. This is not acceptable.

The only way out of the current impasse is for the Government to place Thames Water into a Special Administration Regime.

The Council resolves to ask the Council Leader to write to Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed, to request that Thames Water be put into a Special Administration Regime."

In debating the item, the following points were raised by Members;

- The record of Thames Water was criticised, referencing issues with management of the organisation, as well as public safety and damage to the environment through discharging raw sewage into rivers.
- A member stated that the organisation should be brought into public ownership.
- The Member of Parliament for Witney had put forward amendments to the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which included measures such as pollution reduction but these had not been included in the bill. A new bill was expected, and it was hoped that some of these ideas would be included. Campaigning work around this was also highlighted.

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- Staff working for Thames Water had important expertise and were thanked for their good work, but the governance of the organisation was questioned. It was felt that taking the organisation into Special Administration would protect the environment.
- Residents were not provided with a choice of providers, so it was stated that the company functioned as a monopoly.
- The pricing of the lending being proposed by creditors indicated that the organisation was in probable collapse.
- The District's health and wellbeing was a priority for the Council, the motion would ensure a sustainable future for the district. While the Council did not have direct power over the governance of Thames Water, it was felt it could influence Government to make change.
- The Council had held several meetings to negotiate with Thames Water but some members felt that this had not worked to resolve the matters raised through the debate.
- One Member highlighted that they did not think that the financial management of a private organisation was for a matter for the Government to interfere with.
- It was important to work on the issue of cleaner rivers on a cross-party basis.

The motion was put to a vote and was agreed by Council.

Resolved that:

- I. The Council resolves to ask the Council Leader to write to Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed, to request that Thames Water be put into a Special Administration Regime.

Voting record - For 44, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 1

CL.223 Exclusion of Public and Press

The Council did not resolve to go into private session.

CL.224 Recommendations from Executive - Waste and Environmental Service Review - Exempt Appendix 2

The exempt annex was not discussed.

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The Meeting closed at 3.31 pm

CHAIR