

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, 4 February 2026**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Genny Early (Vice-Chair), Adam Clements, Steve Cosier, Natalie King, Julian Cooper, Nick Leverton, Elizabeth Poskitt, Paul Marsh, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray

Officers: Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Georgina Dyer (Head of Finance), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Mathew Taylor (Democratic Services Officer), Melanie Dodd (Senior Biodiversity Officer), Heather McCulloch (Community Wellbeing Manager) and Leighton Simmons (Senior Ecologist)

Other Councillors in attendance: Rachel Crouch, Andrew Prosser and Alaric Smith

85 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments

Apologies were received from Councillors Liz Leffman, Dan Levy, Mark Walker and Ruth Smith.

Councillor Julian Cooper substituted for Councillor Leffman and Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt substituted for Councillor Levy.

86 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest from members of the Committee.

87 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Genny Early, Vice-Chair of the Committee, noted that she had not made the comment attributed to her in the minutes but rather was pointing out an omission in the previous minutes.

The approval of the minutes, subject to Councillor Early's amendment, was proposed by Councillor Stuart McCarroll and seconded by Councillor Steve Cosier, put to the vote and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 7 January 2026 as an accurate record subject to the minor amendment.

88 Chair's announcements

Andrew Beaney, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, announced that there would be an informal meeting to discuss the work plan for the following year at 4.00pm on 19 February 2026, he encouraged Members to attend.

89 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

90 Budget 2026/27 & medium term financial strategy

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy, highlighting that:

- The associated strategies for treasury, capital and investment had been considered by the Audit and Governance Committee.
- The budget was balanced based on the 3-year government settlement.
- There was a contribution to general fund reserves of £650,884 before growth items, which would help the Council to deliver its priorities.
- There were sufficient reserves to see the Council through to vesting day for the successor authority, although there were a number of unknowns.
- The Committee was considering the second draft of the budget. Version 3 had been published for the Executive the previous day and included some changes from version 2, including savings related to the Ubico contract and the reallocation of Publica costs, which had been favourable for the Council.
- Officers were thanked for their work in delivering a satisfactory budget.

The Committee asked questions and the following points were noted from the responses:

- More information was requested on the £156k growth item for sovereign posts. Negotiations were underway with a small number of employees in shared posts about working 100% for the Council and the Director of Finance agreed to consult SLT on providing more specific information to the Committee.
- There would be costs associated with local government transformation but those costs unknown at this stage and may differ depending on the future unitary model.
- The capital programme reflected the Council's intention to invest in temporary emergency accommodation to better support people experiencing homelessness and, at Woodford Way, the delivery of affordable housing.
- All growth requests included in the budget had been subject to an internal approval process involving the Council's senior leadership team. Where posts were being

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funded for fixed periods, these could potentially be extended through the same process if there was a business case for doing so.

- An additional Environmental Crime Officer post would provide additional capacity to address offenses such as fly tipping and meet the demands on that service.
- The change to the bottom line from version 2 to version 3 of the budget was only £32k but within that there a number of changes, including:
 - o Additional external audit costs (fees were set externally).
 - o An increased Council Tax surplus.
 - o Reduced interest on external borrowing as the Council was now not expected to undertake prudential borrowing in 2026/27.
 - o Adjustments to commercial property income.
 - o The inclusion of mileage costs for Council employees who undertake site visits (previously employed by Publica).
 - o Reduced costs related to the Ubico contract and the rebasing of the Publica cost model.
 - o £50k for exploratory work on undertaking a community governance review following a Council motion.

The Committee thanked the Executive Member and officers for providing clear explanations.

The Committee agreed to consider how to approach scrutinising the budget next year. Members commented that it would have been helpful for the changes in version 3 to have been circulated to the Committee prior to the meeting, or alternatively for the meeting to have been held closer to the February Executive meeting to enable scrutiny of a later version.

91

West Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Plan

Councillor Andrew Prosser, Executive Member for Climate Action and Nature Recovery, presented the item to the Committee, the purpose of which was to provide a progress update on the delivery of the Council's Nature Recovery Plan (2024 – 2030) and an outline of the requirement to publish a report on the implementation of the Council's statutory biodiversity duty for the reporting period 12 February 2024 to 1 January 2026. Councillor Prosser advised that the Nature Recovery Plan had three themes which could be seen at section 2.3 of the report.

In the discussion the following was discussed:

- The Committee explored the likely impact of the Infrastructure Planning Bill on the Nature Recovery Plan. It was noted that the impacts of this were not yet known as secondary legislation was still awaited. Further, it was the intention that the Nature

Recovery Plan would apply to a broader area than planning alone and included Council owned land and policies.

- Members suggested that the report should show more clearly how the investment and officer work was resulting in outcomes that were measurable. It was suggested that it may be beneficial for targets and KPI's to be set on an annual basis, with an eventual ten-year review, so that the impacts of the work could be seen. The officers advised that there was an action tracker with some KPI's and that this could be included in future reports. A Member also suggested that fewer work streams with key deliverables could be beneficial for reporting and more focused work.
- It was noted that the report did not feature a sewerage map, this was seen as an important area of action, and it was suggested that this could be included.
- The Committee considered targets for the use of glyphosate and questioned how its use was tracked. It was suggested that there were challenges in obtaining data to monitor the historic and current use of glyphosate. The Executive Member noted that the target for its use was zero in 2026 but noted exceptions to this for cases of certain invasive species. The Principal Ecologist advised that the Council's Woodgreen offices had been trialling zero glyphosate use for the past year which could be expanded. It was proposed that a policy on glyphosate use should be created.
- The Council's engagement with Town and Parish Councils on the plan was explored. Efforts to engage had seen disappointing results and officers were considering meeting in person with representatives as a potential next step. It was suggested that the varying levels of expertise and resource at Town and Parish Councils may have been a barrier to implementing aspects of nature recovery. Members were encouraged to advise Parish and Town Councils that the Council did fund organisations, such as Wild Oxfordshire, to give support in this area and to contact officers for information.
- Within new housing developments it was suggested that Management Companies did not undertake the required biodiversity work that was promised. Solutions to this issue were explored. Officers suggested that the emerging Local Plan included ongoing stewardship requirements on developers and Biodiversity Net Gain would be monitored for thirty years. A Member suggested that in future the Council could own and manage the green spaces to ensure the biodiversity work continued and was completed. The Chair suggested that this topic could be added to the work plan.
- It was suggested that the Council's approach to the biodiversity of rivers was fragmented and value could be added by the Council through providing support, co-ordination and overarching strategies. Examples were given where the Council could have assisted projects by helping to establish land ownership. The Executive Member noted that the emerging Local Plan was an overarching strategy. The Officer noted that the Council did facilitate collaboration between catchment projects. A Member suggested that while smaller projects added value for rivers, Thames Water needed to be held accountable.
- A query was raised to the number of swift bricks on Council owned land. The Officer advised that installation at Woodgreen was imminent following maintenance work.
- Members discussed who was responsible for handling the removal of non-native invasive species. Officers advised that cases could be reported and dealt with by the Council however in some cases it was the landowner's responsibility.

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- The Chair queried when a decision would be made on the ongoing support for the Windrush Project. Officers advised that positive meetings had been held and the service level agreement had been reviewed. A further meeting was planned for later in February, but the Council's expectation was that bids should be delivered in the year.

RESOLVED:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1. Noted the progress made in delivering the Nature Recovery Plan (2024 – 2030); and
2. Noted the requirement to publish a report on the Council's implementation of the statutory biodiversity duty within 12 weeks of the end of the reporting period (26th March 2026).
3. Agreed to submit the following recommendations to the Executive:
 - i. That the Council sets out a clear policy and timeline for ceasing the use of glyphosate.
 - ii. That the Council's nature recovery reporting is focused on a more limited number of work streams, with clear Key Performance Indicators.

92

Supporting mental health initiatives

Councillor Rachel Crouch, Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities, presented the item the purpose of which was to update on activities undertaken by the Council to promote good mental health.

In her presentation Councillor Crouch made the following points:

- Section two of the report had set out the current data across Oxfordshire that related to mental health.
- The actions that had been undertaken by the Council to promote better mental health were shown in section four of the report. Councillor Crouch gave examples that included: the Mental Health Summit; training for Councillors; West Oxfordshire Youth Partnership meetings; research in Central Witney Ward; funding for APCAM and others; Westhive projects; YouMove; Low Income Family Tracker and a Volunteers' Fair.
- Councillor Crouch reiterated the support that was available for Councillors and highlighted the upcoming sessions on the mental health Training delivered by MIND.

In the discussion the following points were raised:

- New housing developments needed to include a specific mental health scheme to tackle the potential for disconnected communities. Developments should also be

planned to avoid such disconnection through segmenting different residents. The risk of disconnect was even greater given the scale of the proposed developments in the district. There was a suggestion that such schemes could be included in the emerging Local Plan. Members also commented that it was essential for large developments to include a community hub to help tackle disconnected and socially isolated residents. The example of Shilton Park was given. A member noted that a motivated and dynamic person was often essential to ensure such hubs were successful.

- Suggestions for further action in the area of mental health were raised such as: Officers visiting and collaborating with schools and parents; additional resources for GLL to provide more activities; promotion of schemes and improvement of Council communications; targeting late teens to improve access to fitness resources. The officers noted that they were working with GLL to increase capacity for activities and S106 monies were available for this. The Chair commented that the current communication methods may have missed older children who preferred other media to gather information.
- The Executive Member advised that the key resources that had been identified as needed for organisations working in mental health were spaces to operate and transport. Further resource and work had been done in this area and spaces for services to operate in Witney had been identified. At present ten thousand pounds had been allocated for this work.
- A Member queried if the research that had been undertaken in the Central Witney Ward could be expanded to other areas of the district. Officers advised that this research had been targeted at this ward on the basis of identified health inequality. Further work of this type would require additional financial and officer resource.
- The Committee explored the possibility of the Council encouraging employers to use their apprenticeship levy to develop mental health roles, rather than the current predominant focus on operational roles. This was noted to be an underexplored area which officers would look at.
- Officer training for assisting residents with mental health difficulties and the Council's touchpoints were explored, including the current Woodgreen office reception arrangements. Officers advised that training was available and those officers in particularly challenging roles received specific training. The future direction of the reception at Woodgreen was currently under consideration.
- The Chair encouraged all Members to sign up for the training on Mental Health for Councillors.

RESOLVED:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. Noted the report.
2. Agreed to submit the following recommendations to the Executive:
 - i. That the Council allocates resources to replicate the Community Health Insight Profile (CHIP) undertaken in Central Witney, in other parts of the district.
 - ii. That the Council increases the funding for the mental health projects from £10k to £20k.

- iii. That the Council reviews the reception arrangements at Woodgreen.

93 Report back on recommendations

The Committee noted the letter that had been sent to Oxfordshire County Council on behalf of the Committee in response to the County Council's consultation on proposed changes to the fire and rescue service.

94 Updates from Task and Finish Groups

The Chair noted that the Leisure Task and Finish Groups work had now been completed. Questions from the Waste Transformation Task and Finish Group were still awaiting responses and officers were asked to follow this up and arrange a further meeting of the Group within the current civic year.

Councillor Genny Early, Vice-Chair of the Committee, advised that the Public Conveniences Task and Finish Group had considered the forthcoming Executive report titled "Investment in Public Conveniences" and had endorsed the proposals therein.

95 Committee Work Programme

Further to the discussion at item 8, it was proposed that an item on Management Companies in new developments be added to the Committee Work Plan.

96 Executive Work Programme

There were no comments on the Executive Work Programme.

The Meeting closed at 8.13 pm.

CHAIR