

## 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, 26 February 2025**

#### PRESENT

Councillors: Elizabeth Poskitt (Chair), Andrew Coles (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Lidia Arciszewska, Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, Mike Baggaley, Andrew Beaney, Michael Brooker, Adam Clements, David Cooper, Julian Cooper, Rachel Crouch, Genny Early, Duncan Enright, Roger Faulkner, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Charlie Maynard, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Andrew Prosser, Nigel Ridpath, Carl Rylett, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Tim Sumner, Sarah Veasey, Liam 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), Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica), Jon Dearing (Interim Executive Director), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Bill Oddy (Assistant Director for Commercial Development), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer) and Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant)

#### **CL.229 Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the ordinary Council meeting held on 29 January 2025 were considered. A minor amendment was made under CL.222. The words “(and circulated in the supplementary pack)” were added.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed accepting the minutes and Councillor Duncan Enright seconded the proposal. The minutes were voted on and agreed unanimously.

Voting record – For 43, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 0

Resolved: To approve the minutes of the ordinary Council meeting held on 29 January as an accurate record of the meeting, subject to amendments.

The minutes of the extraordinary Council meeting held on 29 January 2025 were considered. There were no amendments to these.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed accepting the minutes, Councillor Duncan Enright seconded this proposal. The minutes were voted on and agreed.

Council **resolved** to:

- I. Approve the minutes of the extraordinary Council meeting held on 29 January as an accurate record of the meeting.

Voting record – For 41, against 0, abstentions 1, did not vote 1

#### **CL.230 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Steve Cosier, Jane Doughty Natalie King, Dan Levy, Martin McBride and Mark Walker.

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**CL.231 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

**CL.232 Receipt of Announcements**

In introducing the meeting, the Chair explained that item seven “Recommendations from Executive” had been missed off the agenda in error. As the Council tax support scheme needed to be agreed before the next meeting of the Council on 19 March, the agenda had been reissued with the agreement of the Chair, by reason of special circumstance under Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972.

The Chair gave an overview of civic duties completed since the last meeting and highlighted upcoming events. The Chair had;

- Welcomed the Duke of Edinburgh to West Oxfordshire on his visit to the Branch Community Hub. The Chair would also be visiting the Branch alongside the Chair of Oxfordshire Country Council in the upcoming weeks.
- Attended the High Sheriff’s law lecture.
- Attended Blenheim Palace to celebrate the affiliation of the County with the HMS Diamond.
- Arranged a quiz, which was to take place on March 7, the Chair encouraged Members to attend this and buy raffle tickets.
- Arranged a guided tour of the Hanborough Bus museum which was due to take place on 17 May.

The Chair also explained that the date of next meeting was on 19 March. This meeting had been moved from 26 March due to the County pre-election period.

The Leader, Councillor Andy Graham, explained that in November the Council agreed a motion to write to the Minister for Pensions on the changes to winter fuel allowances. In the Minister’s response, it was explained that they had decided to publish the Equality Impact Assessment associated with this due to public interest. The Leader stated that they believed this to be in part due to the Council writing to the Minister.

The Leader also stated that a briefing on Local Government Devolution and Reorganisation would be taking place on 6 March.

The Deputy Leader, Councillor Duncan Enright stated that a new restaurant, Pokhara Delight, had opened on Mariott’s walk in Witney.

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The Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities, Councillor Rachel Crouch, announced that a new Youth Development Officer had been appointed on a full time, temporary contract for two years. The Executive Member stated that the Council had put aside an additional £10,000 to help fund local mental health support, and that the Council would be bringing together local specialists and frontline services to best understand how to use this funding. The Executive Member thanked Councillor Alex Wilson for his support on this work and highlighted the importance of cross party working.

The Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects, Councillor Tim Sumner, explained that the maintenance programme for leisure facilities had been rolled out, with leisure centres offering community inspired events and classes for all abilities and ages.

The Chief Executive explained that in light of the English Devolution White paper, the Boundary Commission had decided to pause the West Oxfordshire Electoral Review.

There were no further announcements.

#### **CL.233 Participation of the Public**

There was no participation of the public.

#### **CL.234 Questions by Members**

The written questions and written responses were circulated prior to the meeting and were taken as read.

Members who had submitted written questions asked supplementary questions. The verbal supplementary questions and the verbal responses to those questions are contained in the supplement to these minutes.

#### **CL.235 Recommendations from Executive**

The report for the item was contained in the supplement to the agenda. It had been added onto the agenda after publication at the discretion of the Chair, as explained in the Chair's announcements.

The purpose of the item was to agree the recommendations made to Council by the Executive in relation to the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2025/26.

Councillor Alaric Smith, the Executive Member for Finance, introduced the item, explaining that it should have been considered at a previous meeting, but had been missed off the agenda.

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Councillor Smith explained that Council tax support was reviewed yearly and that the recommendations within the report were to adjust these for inflation. Councillor Smith proposed accepting the recommendations.

Councillor Andy Graham seconded the proposal to accept the recommendations. These were put to a vote and agreed unanimously.

Full Council **resolved** to:

1. Agree the inflationary increase in income bands as detailed in paragraphs 2.2 and 2.3 of the report from 1 April 2025.
2. Agree that any surplus in the Hardship Fund is transferred over to 2025/2026 for reasons detailed in paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6 of the report.

Voting record – For 43, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 0

#### **CL.236 Report of the Chief Finance Officer on the robustness of the budget estimates, adequacy of the Council's reserves and risk 2025/26**

Councillor Alaric Smith, the Executive Member for Finance, introduced the item and proposed accepting the recommendation to note the report. Councillor Smith explained that it was the statutory duty of the S151 officer to report on the robustness of the Council's budget estimates and that Council must have regard to this report in agreeing the budget. The report concluded that the budget was prudent and robust and that the level of reserves was adequate to support the 2025-26 position, with a surplus of £91,280.

Councillor Smith explained that there was a less optimistic picture from 2026-27, with the use of reserves necessary to fund frontline services and a need to identify new sustainable income streams.

Councillor Andy Graham seconded the proposal to accept the recommendations. These were put to a vote and agreed.

Full Council **resolved** to:

1. Note the report and has regard to it when making its decisions about budget and Council Tax for 2025/26.

Voting record – For 41, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 2

#### **CL.237 Budget 2025/26**

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The purpose of the item was to provide the proposed budget for 2025/26, whilst also considering approval for:

1. The Draft Base Budget for 2025/26
2. The Council's Capital Programme for 2025/26 to 2031/32
3. The level of Council Tax for 2025/26
4. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)
5. The Council's Financial Strategies
6. The Council's Pay Policy Statement

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Andy Graham, presented the budget, explaining that it was set in the context of financial pressures faced by councils across the country. In light of this, the Leader stated that the Council was committed to prudent financial management. The Leader highlighted what the administration had achieved, which included;

- £1m to a football pitch in Witney
- Climate change initiatives, including new electric vehicles for the waste fleet
- Holding Executive meetings on tour, improving engagement with communities
- Continued participation in the PropTech fund
- Improvements in the Council's estate, including solar panels at Elmfield
- Support to communities through the shared prosperity fund and rural England prosperity fund
- Delivering 50 vital services from waste collection to homelessness support
- Savings achieved from better estate management and waste contract renegotiations
- £125,000 in savings within customer services
- Providing homelessness support for local residents

The Leader thanked Officers for their work.

The Leader of the Opposition responded, stating that the increase in Council Tax and green waste licence fees were detrimental to residents, that there was a lack of income in Marriott's Walk due to empty shops and a delay in letting units. The Leader of the Opposition stated that a one-off windfall allocation had been fortuitous to the Council's Budget and that otherwise the MTFS showed that reserves would run out by 2028. The Leader of the Opposition further highlighted that they believed the budget as presented to be a placeholder ahead of local government reorganisation, and that the majority of the capital programme had been carried over from the previous budget, with a lack of new projects.

In debate, alliance members made the following points;

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- The Council had one of the lowest green waste licence fees in the country but an increase was necessary to cover operating costs
- Work had been done to review waste and recycling, leading to improved recycling contracts that saved £80,000 a year with further efficiencies expected by the Waste and Recycling transition project
- Retail and other services made Witney an attractive place to live in, work and visit. The Council had invested £10m into Marriott's walk, and the annual income was £650k, representing a strong return on investment (ROI). The capital investment into the Elmfield site was also highlighted as having increased net income for the Council through business rate savings, it was stated that the overall cost of the agile working project was £1.55m which was providing a 12.9% yearly ROI.
- In response to the lack of new projects raised by the Leader of the opposition, special projects within the budget were highlighted by alliance members, particularly the Council's work on housing and homelessness prevention.
- The budget had included growth within the planning team, including new roles, in a full time Proactive Enforcement Officer, a part-time Planning Services Transformation Lead, and a full time Tree Officer
- Section 106 projects were being delivered
- In light of inflationary pressure, it was welcome that the Council was able to deliver a balanced budget.

Members of the Opposition made the following points;

- The increase in green waste licence fees had led to a decrease in the number of residents purchasing these
- The Council was proposing to increase Council tax
- The Publica transition had cost the Council a lot of money
- The Council was not sufficiently supporting local businesses on the high street, leading to the closing of local businesses, although this was disputed by a member of the alliance who stated that business was strong
- The Council was inadequate at carrying out responsibilities such as sweeping roads
- The Council had not fought development appeals successfully
- The Witney football pitch was a Section 106 project, funded by developer contributions

Councillor Alaric Smith seconded the Budget, stating that the purpose of local government was to provide services in an effective way and that the budget allowed the administration to do this. Councillor Smith stated that the Council had achieved a balanced budget which also contributed £91,280 to reserves. Councillor Smith stated that this was an achievement in light of external funding pressures faced by all councils and a 40% reduction in the Council's funding from business rates. Councillor Smith also made reference to the delivery of homelessness

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prevention services, the upgrading of the waste fleet and investment in youth services as well as a leisure contract that would take the Council through to 2027.

In summing up, Councillor Andy Graham stated that the administration was delivering a positive budget. Councillor Graham stated that the current administration was seeking to invest in areas such as planning and the Council's assets following a lack of funding.

Council resolved to approve:

1. The General Fund Revenue Budget as Summarised in Annex A.
2. The Updated Medium Term Financial Strategy in Annex B.
3. The Capital Programme for 2025/26 to 2031/32 as set out in Annex D.
4. The Council's Pay Policy Statement as set out in Annex J.
5. The Council's Capital Strategy as set out in Annex K
6. The Council's Investment Strategy as set out in Annex L
7. The Council's Treasury Strategy as set out in Annex M

Voting record- 32 for, 2 against, 9 abstentions, 0 did not vote

<b>Budget 2025/26 - To approve the recommendations (Resolution)</b>		
For	Councillor Joy Aitman, Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Councillor Hugo Ashton, Councillor Mike Baggaley, Councillor Michael Brooker, Councillor Adam Clements, Councillor Andrew Coles, Councillor Julian Cooper, Councillor Rachel Crouch, Councillor Genny Early, Councillor Duncan Enright, Councillor Phil Godfrey, Councillor Andy Goodwin, Councillor Andy Graham, Councillor David Jackson, Councillor Liz Leffman, Councillor Andrew Lyon, Councillor Paul Marsh, Councillor Charlie Maynard, Councillor Stuart McCarroll, Councillor David Melvin, Councillor Rosie Pearson, Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, Councillor Andrew Prosser, Councillor Nigel Ridpath, Councillor Carl Rylett, Councillor Geoff Saul, Councillor Sandra Simpson, Councillor Alaric Smith, Councillor Ruth Smith, Councillor Tim Sumner and Councillor Alistair Wray	32
Against	Councillor David Cooper and Councillor Edward James	2
Conflict Of Interests	None	0
Abstain	Councillor Thomas Ashby, Councillor Andrew Beaney, Councillor Roger Faulkner, Councillor Nick Leverton, Councillor Michele Mead, Councillor Sarah Veasey, Councillor Liam Walker, Councillor Adrian Walsh and Councillor Alex Wilson	9
<b>Carried</b>		

**CL.238 Council Tax 2025/26**

The purpose of the item was to enable the Council to calculate and set the Council Tax for 2025/26.

Cllr Alaric Smith proposed accepting the recommendations in Annex A of the agenda and expressed confidence in the officers who had done the work on this.

Cllr Andy Graham seconded the recommendations.

Council **resolved** to:

- 1) Note that for the purpose of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 Section 35(2), there are no special expenses for the District Council in 2025/26;
- 2) Note that at its meeting held on 15 January 2025 the Executive acknowledged the calculation of the Council Tax Base for 2025/26:
  - a) for the whole Council area as 48,742.33 [item T in the formula in Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as amended (the “Act”)]; and
  - b) for dwellings in those parts of its area to which a Parish Precept relates as in the attached Schedule 1.
- 3) Agree that the Council Tax requirement for the Council’s own purposes for 2025/26 (excluding Parish Precepts and Special Expenses) is £129.38
- 4) Agree that the following amounts be calculated for the year 2025/26 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Act:
  - a) £56,510,866 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act, taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish Councils and any additional special expenses.
  - b) £44,364,176 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A (3) of the Act.
  - c) £12,146,690 being the amount by which the aggregate at 4(a) above exceeds the aggregate at 4(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its Council Tax requirement for the year (Item R in the formula in Section 31B of the Act).
  - d) £249.20 being the amount at 4(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (2(a) above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year (including Parish Precepts and Special Expenses).
  - e) £5,840,407 being the aggregate amount of all special items (Parish Precepts and Special Expenses) referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act as per the attached Schedule 2.
  - f) £129.38 being the amount at 4(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at 4(e) above by Item T(2(a) above), calculated by the Council, in



accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no Parish Precept or special item relates.

- g) the amounts shown in Schedule 2 being the amounts given by adding to the amount at 4(f) above, the amounts of the special item or items relating to dwellings in those parts of the Council's area shown in Schedule 2 divided in each case by the amount at 2(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34(3) of the Act, as the basic amounts of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which one or more special items relate.
- h) the amounts shown in Schedule 3 being the amounts given by multiplying the amounts at 4(f) and 4(g) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band divided by the number which in that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation Band D, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 36(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands.
- 5) Note that for the year 2025/26 the Oxfordshire County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley have issued precepts to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each category of dwellings in the Council's area as indicated below:

Valuation Band	Oxfordshire County Council £	Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley £
A	£1,274.27	£188.85
B	£1,486.64	£220.33
C	£1,699.02	£251.80
D	£1,911.40	£283.28
E	£2,336.16	£346.23
F	£2,760.91	£409.18
G	£3,185.67	£472.13
H	£3,822.80	£566.56

- 6) Agree that the Council, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the amounts shown in Schedule 4 as the amounts of Council Tax for the year 2025/26 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings.

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- 7) Agree that the Council's basic amount of Council Tax for 2025/26 is not excessive in accordance with principles approved under Section 52ZB Local Government Finance Act 1992.
- 8) Agree that the following Council/Public Officers: Director of Finance, Interim Executive Director – Resident Services, Legal Services Manager, Legal Executive, Business Manager – Environmental, Welfare and Revenue Services, Revenues Manager, Revenues Lead and Court Officer be authorised to:
  - a) collect and recover any National Non-Domestic Rates and Council Tax, and
  - b) prosecute or defend on the Council's behalf or to appear on its behalf in proceedings before a magistrate's court in respect of unpaid National Non-Domestic Rates and Council Tax.

Voting record – For 43, against 0, abstentions 0, did not vote 0

<b>Council Tax 2025/26 (Resolution)</b>		
For	Councillor Joy Aitman, Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Councillor Thomas Ashby, Councillor Hugo Ashton, Councillor Mike Baggaley, Councillor Andrew Beaney, Councillor Michael Brooker, Councillor Adam Clements, Councillor Andrew Coles, Councillor David Cooper, Councillor Julian Cooper, Councillor Rachel Crouch, Councillor Genny Early, Councillor Duncan Enright, Councillor Roger Faulkner, Councillor Phil Godfrey, Councillor Andy Goodwin, Councillor Andy Graham, Councillor David Jackson, Councillor Edward James, Councillor Liz Leffman, Councillor Nick Leverton, 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 Carl Rylett, Councillor Geoff Saul, Councillor Sandra Simpson, Councillor Alaric Smith, Councillor Ruth Smith, Councillor Tim Sumner, Councillor Sarah Veasey, Councillor Liam Walker, Councillor Adrian Walsh, Councillor Alex Wilson and Councillor Alistair Wray	43
Against	None	0
Conflict Of Interests	None	0
Abstain	None	0
<b>Carried</b>		

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**CL.239 Motion A: Devolution and Local Democracy, Proposed by Councillor Rosie Pearson, Seconded by Councillor Andrew Prosser**

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Councillor Rosie Pearson introduced the motion. Councillor Michelle Mead proposed an amendment to the motion which was to change 'disadvantage' to 'advantage'. This was agreed by the proposer and seconder as an alteration to the motion. The substantive motion as amended was read out by Councillor Pearson;

“This motion seeks to establish the key principles which should underlie a democratic devolution process for the future Thames Valley region’s strategic authority. We want to see democracy enhanced, and proper accountability to residents and to the unitary authorities which will take over from district and county councils. This Council should support and advocate for the following principles:

- 1) **Democratic oversight of combined authorities:** the decisions, actions and budgets of the strategic authority need scrutiny by a body/assembly with proportional political representation from elected councillors in unitary authorities. This would ensure power is exercised transparently and in the best interests of residents, and prevent excessive power being concentrated in a single individual. Consideration should be given to mayoral candidates standing as joint mayor and deputy candidates.
- 2) **A fairer voting system:** Until 2023, mayoral elections in England were conducted under the Supplementary Vote system. This Council should advocate for a fairer voting system than First Past the Post in future mayoral elections.
- 3) **Costs and fairness:** Mayoral elections should be inclusive, without excessive financial barriers for candidates. The current costs of standing in mayoral elections (£5,000 deposit, and £5,000 candidate booklet contribution) is too high. There should be reasonable limits on election spending so that those candidates with the deepest pockets do not have an unfair advantage.
- 4) **Local representation:** unitary authorities should not be so large that they lose local knowledge and influence or the important connection with rural and urban communities. Town and parish councils should have enhanced powers and financial compensation. Strong lines of connection should be made between them and the unitaries, so that there is a clear chain of representation at all levels.
- 5) **Democratic oversight of this council’s decisions:** a mechanism should be found to ensure that decisions made during the devolution and local government reorganization process put the long-term future of residents ahead of any short-term political considerations. This could be, for example, a cross-party working group on devolution.”

In debate, members raised the following points;

- While some members welcomed parts of the motion such as a fairer voting system, and involving local councils in the process, they felt that the motion conflated local government reorganisation with devolution, and that some of the proposals pre-empted the process that councils would be going through to put forward proposals for reorganisation.
- An all member briefing on devolution would be held on March 6, and agreeing a motion in advance of this felt premature to many.

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- It was welcome that a motion was coming forward as it indicated that members had concerns about reorganisation.
- More could be done on a fairer voting system than was suggested in the motion, and some members wanted this extended to all elections.
- Some Members stated that they would be abstaining due to the timing, not the sentiment of the motion.

Councillor Andrew Prosser seconded the motion, stating that it set out key principles that were important for the Government to take into account as part of the work on devolution and local government reorganisation regardless of the point in time.

Councillors Carl Rylett and Adam Clements had left the meeting before the vote, and did not vote on the item.

Council resolved to:

- I. Approve the devolution and local democracy motion, with the minor alteration to the wording.

Voting record – For 18, against 9, abstain 12, did not vote 4

The Meeting closed at 3.46 pm

CHAIR