

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, 28 January 2026.**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Coles (Chair), Carl Rylett (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Lidia Arciszewska, Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, Mike Baggaley, Andrew Beaney, Michael Brooker, Adam Clements, David Cooper, Julian Cooper, Sandra Cosier, Steve Cosier, Genny Early, Duncan Enright, Roger Faulkner, Phil Godfrey, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Levertton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Martin McBride, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Elizabeth Poskitt, Andrew Prosser, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Tim Sumner, Sarah Veasey, Liam Walker and Alistair Wray

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

Other Councillors in attendance:

CL.63 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Nigel Ridpath, Mark Walker, Jane Doughty, Rachel Crouch, Adrian Walsh, Andy Goodwin and Alex Wilson.

CL.64 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest

CL.65 Minutes of Previous Meeting

It was proposed by the Leader of the Council and seconded by the Deputy Leader,

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting of Full Council held on 3 February 2026 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

CL.66 Receipt of Announcements

The Chair, Leader, Executive Members, Chief Executive, Director of Finance and Director of Governance were invited to make any relevant announcements. These were as follows.

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Chairman

It was with sadness that the Chair of the Council announced the recent passing of Ex Councillor Ian Hudspeth, who served as member for Woodstock and Bladen between 2002 and 2012 and David Nicholson, who served Witney East from 2003-2007.

The Chair stated that both would be greatly missed and that his thoughts were with the respective families. A number of Members rose to speak in tribute to them. One Member stated that the late Cllr Hudspeth had displayed a great deal of passion about Oxfordshire and that he had been the inspiration behind her desire to serve as a Member of the Council. Tributes were also paid to Cllr Nicholson. The comments were echoed by many others.

The Chair also gave mention to Lance Corporal George Hooley of the Parachute Regiment, who was killed while on military service in Ukraine. His body was repatriated to RAF Brice Norton just before Christmas.

A minute's silence was observed for all those who had lost their lives.

The Chair then took the opportunity to thank Members for their attendance at the Carol Service prior to Christmas and expressed his appreciation to Cllrs Cooper and Ashby for their contributions. Members were also informed about the upcoming coffee morning and bake sale which aimed to raise funds for his chosen charity, scheduled to be held on 20 February 10-12pm.

Leader Of the Council

The Leader confirmed that the elections would go ahead as planned in May 2026. He also stated that a consultation on Local Government Reorganisation was currently underway following which a decision as to the preferred option would be decided upon.

Executive Members

Cllr Ashton provided a brief update on the preferred spatial options consultation, stating that the responses received indicated a high level of engagement from consultees on the Local Plan. Members could expect the consultation summary report to be published in March which would provide further information as to the nature and detail of the responses.

Cllr Smith informed Members regarding the expected completion of the sale of the Council-owned property at Towns Road, Oxford and the associated revenue saving of approximately

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£158,000. This would also provide the council with a capital receipt which would be used to help fund the capital programme, including temporary emergency accommodation.

Chief Executive

The Chief Executive announced that following Council's consideration of the issue of devolution in the Thames Valley and the proposal for a mayoral strategic authority, the Government had responded positively to the request. As such the Minister for Devolution, faith and Communities had been keen to discuss the matter further to help progress the matter.

CL.67 Changes to Councils Working Groups

Members were informed of a change in the membership of the Constitution Working Group under delegated authority from Cllr Andrew Coles to Cllr Duncan Enright.

It was proposed by the Leader and seconded by Cllr Rylett.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and actioned.

CL.68 Participation of the Public

No submissions had been received from members of the public prior to the deadline of 2.00pm on Friday 23 January

CL.69 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, answers, verbal supplementary questions and supplementary answers were detailed in a separate document appended to the minutes of the meeting.

Q2 Supplementary

Cllr Ashby enquired as to how many insurance claims had been made and paid out from the Council's insurance company.

Answer: The Executive Member Cllr Smith offered to provide the requested information in writing.

Q4 Supplementary

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Cllr Ashby enquired about the Council's timescale for the opening of the adventure play area. He also sought some assurance that the space would be accessible to the entire town and requested that this be included within the terms and conditions of usage.

Answer: Cllr Sumner offered to provide a written response to the question, and noted the comment regarding accessibility.

Q6 Supplementary

Cllr Meade asked about the progress of the recruitment process for the running of the Cartherton area strategy.

Answer: The Director of Place responded informing the Member that following a successful recruitment process in December 2025, the appointed individual had failed to fill the role. As such a two staged approach would now be adopted whereby a temporary individual would be appointed to move the project forward, whilst also running a new recruitment process alongside it. It was anticipated that the temporary position would be filled by the end of February at the latest.

CL.70 Additional Committee Meeting

Members were informed of an omission to the programme of meetings for the 2026/27 municipal year. Members were requested to agree to the addition of a meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee on 18 March 2027.

It was proposed by Cllr Enright and seconded by the Chair.

RESOLVED: That the scheduling of an additional meeting of the Audit and Governance on 18 March 2027 be agreed.

CL.71 Draft Budget 2026/27

Cllr Smith introduced the report to Members stating that the purpose of this report was to provide an update on the draft budget and budget setting process and to consider two recommendations which had been made by the Executive at its meeting held on the 14 January.

The draft budget for 2026/27 was submitted for Members consideration, ahead of approval of the final budget at the forthcoming meeting of Full Council on 25 February 2026. Members were informed that the Council had been required to set realistic budgets, balancing current need and future financial stability to ensure that adequate reserves were maintained over the medium term. The first draft of the revenue budget for 2026/27 had already been presented to

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the Executive on 17 December 2025, whilst the current draft had been updated with the provisional government funding settlement, draft fees and charges and the final tax base.

A summary of the changes to the budget were set out on pages 23-36 of the agenda pack. The report also provided details of the funding settlement and the assumptions made for both the revenue budget and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) including the current drivers of growth. This was highlighted in section 6 of the report.

The report emphasised that the budget and MTFS had been produced without incorporating any potential impacts from Local Government Reorganisation due to the impossibility of providing any credible financial projections. However, Members were informed that LGR would have an impact on the delivery of Council services and the financial position up until the establishment of the new Unitary Authority in April 2028.

In considering the report before them Members welcomed the budget proposals which was described as having exemplified the progressive yet prudent approach of the current administration. One Member highlighted the substantial level of investment that had been made in respect of the acquisition of properties for the purpose of temporary emergency accommodation. This had proved to have been hugely beneficial for addressing homelessness. Another Member spoke in support of the draft budget highlighting the increase in the allocation of resources toward the planning function. This was viewed as being of particular significance in the light of the changing policies directed by central government in the area of both planning policy and the development management process. A further comment on the budget was made with regard to the active investment work which was taking place around nature recovery and the importance of delivering on the objectives across the district and the county. This important area of work had been greatly advanced by the grant funded Nature Recovery officer role which had facilitated contact with other organisations and as such helped to deliver on the set objectives of the Council.

A number of other Members also rose to endorse the draft budget, whilst the Leader expressed his gratitude to the hardworking Members and staff that had made the Council of West Oxfordshire successful in achieving its key objectives. The Executive Member also thanked the Director of Finance and her team for all the work that had been undertaken in the preparation of the draft budget.

It was proposed by Cllr Smith and seconded by the Leader

RESOLVED: That,

(I) The Council Tax Base shown in Annex C, calculated as £49,561.59 for the year 2026/27 be approved,

(II) The Director of Finance be authorised to submit the National Non-Domestic Rates Return I (NNDRI) to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government by the submission date of 31 January 2026.

CL.72 Motion A: Mobile phone reception in rural areas - Proposed by Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Seconded by Councillor Steve Cosier

Councillor Lidia Arciszewska introduced the motion and advised that this had been altered and now read as follows:

“Mobile phone reception is very patchy in West Oxfordshire. There are many areas with no mobile signal, extending over significant parts of villages and occasionally encompassing entire settlements. This has been a major frustration for residents, farmers and businesses, whether at home, work, or out and about; for example, when cycling and walking to work or school, or when they are outdoors for sports or recreation. People have been complaining about this for years.

Moreover, there is a new growing concern among the public related to the lack of mobile phone reception, as traditional BT copper phone lines are being phased out and customers are being moved to Voice over Internet Protocol, VoIP, which is delivered over a broadband connection and dependent on electricity supply. Therefore, during any power outages, residents and businesses in areas with no mobile signal have no means to communicate with the outside world. While telephone companies have an obligation to protect vulnerable customers, every household in a non-signal area is at risk. Although switching to digital services is a great step forward, its implementation provides another powerful case for the need to provide rural areas in Oxfordshire with full mobile signal coverage.

The Council resolves to ask the Leader,

1. To write to Rt Hon Ian Murray, the Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to ask what the government’s strategy is to ensure full mobile signal coverage in rural areas.
2. To ask the Director of Place to work with the County Council to identify the areas lacking mobile phone signal across the district, and include the information in the letter to the minister.”

Councillor Arciszewska suggested that climate change had increased the risk to vulnerable people when mobile signal was not available. It was also noted that the points raised in the motion had been made at a previous meeting and subsequently representatives from Mobile Phone UK had given a briefing, however no action had been taken. The mobile phone industry was market driven and therefore this was a nationwide problem that required a government level solution.

The alteration of the original motion was accepted by Councillor Steve Cosier who seconded the motion. Councillor Cosier made the following points:

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- The patchy nature of network coverage was an issue for farmers, business owners, parents and vulnerable residents. The lack of coverage affected safety, growth, investment and tourism in the district and was a health and safety issue. The National Farmers Union was calling on the government to prioritise rural connectivity as it was the number one barrier to growth.
- There were twenty-five “not spots” in tier five settlements in the district.
- Previous promises following attendance at the Council’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee and promises of the shared rural network had not been met.
- In September 2025 Oxfordshire County Council had invested £500k to create a digital twin of the County’s mobile network to map gaps in coverage. It was now time for Government to follow local council leads and act on this matter.
- Batteries provided for those who would be reliant on VOIP lasted for between one and seven hours. Storms leading to power cuts in the district lasted longer than this period and therefore residents would be vulnerable.
- Residents who used Telecare red button pendants were also at risk without a mobile signal.

There were no objections to the alteration from Members and so the altered motion was debated.

In the debate the following points were raised:

- Websites such as “map your mobile online” and “signal checker” were useful tools for Members when dealing with this issue in their wards.
- It was proposed that the letter was also sent to OFCOM and mobile phone network providers advising of where the gaps in coverage were.
- It was noted that in some emergency call situations the callers network provider was not necessarily used, instead the nearest mast was accessed.
- Pendants were also noted to operate on Wi-Fi.
- It was acknowledged that Government should act but reiterated that local councils had a role to play in addressing the issue.
- Network operators had struggled to gain sites and planning permission for masts in rural areas, and this was noted to be a barrier to coverage.

In summarising, Councillor Arciszewska stated that she was happy that the letter should also be sent to OFCOM and mobile phone network providers. Councillor Arciszewska also acknowledged that councils had a role to play and this was the purpose of the motion.

The altered motion was put to the vote as follows:

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For 42, Against 0, Abstentions 0

The Council resolved:

1. To ask the Leader, To write to Rt Hon Ian Murray, the Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to ask what the government's strategy is to ensure full mobile signal coverage in rural areas.
2. To ask the Director of Place to work with the County Council to identify the areas lacking mobile phone signal across the district and include the information in the letter to the minister.

CL.73 Motion B: Local Governance Review: Parish and Town Boundary Review for West Oxfordshire - Proposed by Councillor Michele Mead, Seconded by Councillor Liam Walker

Councillor Michele Mead introduced the motion, which read as follows:

“This Council notes:

That parish and town councils form the most local tier of democratic governance and play a vital role in representing community identity, delivering services, and fostering civic pride across West Oxfordshire.

That West Oxfordshire has experienced changes in population, housing development, settlement patterns, and community usage in recent years, including significant growth on the edges of existing parishes and towns. That in some areas current parish and town boundaries no longer accurately reflect community identities, patterns of service use, or the expectations of residents.

That the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 provides district councils with the power to conduct Local Governance Reviews to ensure parish and town arrangements remain effective and representative.

This Council believes:

That parish and town boundaries should be logical, clearly understood, and reflective of established and emerging communities.

That regular review of governance arrangements is good practice and supports strong local democracy.

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That any review should be locally driven, evidence-based, and involve meaningful engagement with residents, parish and town councils, and other stakeholders.

This Council resolves:

That council officers undertake a Community Governance Review focused specifically on parish and town boundary arrangements across West Oxfordshire.

That the review should:

Assess whether existing boundaries remain appropriate considering housing growth, demographic change, and community identity.

Consider requests or representations from parish and town councils and residents. Seek to ensure boundaries promote effective governance, community cohesion, and clarity for residents.

To require that the review includes a full programme of public consultation with affected parish and town councils, ward members, and local communities.

To request that officers bring forward a detailed scope, timetable, and consultation plan for approval by Executive and Council prior to the commencement of the review.

That no changes to boundaries will be implemented without full consultation and formal approval by Council.”

Councillor Mead stated that large towns, such as Witney and Carterton, were seeing houses built just outside their boundaries. In such cases these towns did not receive the precept associated with the developments but were nevertheless the main service centres for them. The service centres were therefore inundated with demand without the money to provide the services required.

Councillor Liam Walker seconded the motion and reserved the right to speak.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed an amendment to the motion which was as follows:

“This Council notes:

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That parish and town councils form the most local tier of democratic governance and play a vital role in representing community identity, delivering services, and fostering civic pride across West Oxfordshire.

That West Oxfordshire has experienced changes in population, housing development, settlement patterns, and community usage in recent years, including significant growth on the edges of existing parishes and towns.

That in some areas current parish and town boundaries no longer accurately reflect community identities, patterns of service use, or the expectations of residents.

That the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 provides district councils with the power to conduct Local Governance Reviews to ensure parish and town arrangements remain effective and representative.

This Council believes:

That parish and town boundaries should be logical, clearly understood, and reflective of established and emerging communities.

That regular review of governance arrangements is good practice and supports strong local democracy.

That any review should be locally driven, evidence-based, and involve meaningful engagement with residents, parish and town councils, and other stakeholders.

This Council resolves:

That council officers consider undertaking a Community Governance Review focused specifically on parish and town boundary arrangements across West Oxfordshire.

That the review should:

Assess whether existing boundaries remain appropriate considering housing growth, demographic change, and community identity.

Consider requests or representations from parish and town councils and residents.

Seek to ensure boundaries promote effective governance, community cohesion, and clarity for residents.

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To require that the review includes a full program of public consultation with affected parish and town councils, ward members, and local communities.

To request that officers bring forward a detailed scope, timetable, budget and consultation plan for approval by Executive and Council prior to the commencement of the review, and once the Government's decision on Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire is known.

That no changes to boundaries will be implemented without full consultation and formal approval by Council.

Councillor Graham stated that the amendment had taken account of further implications of undertaking a boundary review that were not specified in the original motion. The amended motion would allow officers time to return to Council with the full detail that was needed to consider implementing a boundary review. Key considerations would include budgetary issues and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) timeframes.

Councillor Duncan Enright seconded the amendment.

Having sought clarity on the intended role of officers in the consideration of the boundary review that was suggested in the amendment to the motion, Councillor Michele Mead accepted the amendment as proposed. Councillor Liam Walker as seconder also accepted the amendment as proposed.

The Chair then invited the members to debate the substantive motion as amended. In the discussion the following points were made:

- Boundary changes were inevitable following the shadow elections for LGR though exact timescales were not known.
- The relationship between the Council and Town and Parish Councils was important.
- The service centres could not be expected to wait for LGR for boundary changes as development was taking place already. The service centres were increasingly struggling to provide services to residents.
- The motion did not delay the process but would allow it to be brought into line with the LGR timescales. This would also prevent duplication of work.
- It was clear that historic anomalies had meant that the current boundaries were no longer sensible in some cases.
- Other towns and villages, such as Charlbury, Woodstock, Long Hanborough and Eynsham were experiencing this problem.

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- If a review was delayed until LGR it was possible that officers employed at that point may not hold the detailed local knowledge to undertake an effective boundary review. The local knowledge of the Members may also be lost. This was seen as a reason for the boundary review to happen now.
- It was the responsibility of District Councils to conduct and implement reviews, and it was possible Towns and Parish Councils would not be considered in the LGR process.
- In 2024 it had been previously suggested that it was possible to undertake smaller location specific reviews which would be less costly.
- The Council had a £350k surplus and therefore money was available for the review.
- Other parties had expressed interest in the boundary review including local Town and Parish councils and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee when it considered the Local Plan. Witney Town Council had issued a letter to the District Council requesting a review for the areas surrounding Witney.
- In some cases, there were no representatives of the Parish Councils who lived on the development they represented. The example of Colwell Green, which was in Curbridge Parish, was given.
- The LGR decision was expected in summer, and so the delay to make the decision on a boundary review would only be short. This would still allow time for the review to take place before the Unitary boundaries were decided.
- The Local Plan process, including the consultation, meant that a review at this stage would be premature and undermine the holistic vision proposed. The allocated sites would be clearer following the consultation.
- Current Town and Parish boundaries were also the foundation for District and County Council boundaries.
- The boundaries made a significant difference to parliamentary seats.
- Officer time and resource to undertake the review would be significant and may be understated in the motion.
- Parish Councils would remain after LGR and must have a hand in shaping the future of the district.
- The new emerging communities must be properly represented. It was suggested that part of this representation was consideration of how the communities were “read” in terms of surrounding towns and villages.
- The key information and timeframes for both LGR and the Local Plan were known and there was no reason to delay implementing the framework for a review at this point.
- The motion aligned with national expectations.
- The review should be a robust community shaped governance and thorough audit.

Councillor Liz Leffman left the chamber at 3:28 and returned at 3:30

Councillor Liam Walker spoke as seconder of the motion making the following points:

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- The amendment in respect of LGR was a valid point however the conversation on a boundary review could start now.
- The decision to undertake a review should be for the Council or Executive and not officers.
- Examples of housing developments near service centres that were within the boundaries of smaller parishes were given at Brize Norton, Witney North and Dry Lane.
- Many of the sites in the Local Plan already had applications submitted and as such the review could not be considered premature.

Councillor Michele Mead then concluded the debate by thanking members for their support. As LGR was unclear Councillor Mead felt that it would not be correct to defer a boundary review at this point.

The motion was put to the vote as follows:

For 39, Against 1, Abstentions 0

Resolved:

- I. Council requests officers consider undertaking a Community Governance Review focused specifically on parish and town boundary arrangements across West Oxfordshire.

Councillor Ed James left the chamber at 3:40

CL.74 Motion C: Review and Improve the Fast Track Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG): Proposed by Councillor Genny Early, Seconded by Councillor Andrew Prosser

Councillor Genny Early introduced the motion and advised that she had altered this, and it now read as follows:

“Motor neurone disease (MND) is a rapidly progressing condition – a third of people die within a year of diagnosis and half within two years. As the disease progresses, symptoms worsen and needs increase, often unpredictably. People living with progressive or terminal conditions like MND deserve to live in safe, accessible homes. They have the right to independence and quality of life in the time they have left.

Council notes:

- It is our council's role to ensure that local people living with MND are supported to access the home adaptations they need in a timely manner. Without timely support, people face becoming trapped in unsuitable and unsafe homes. This risks significant negative impacts on their health and well-being, including increased risk of avoidable hospital admissions and early entry into care.
- The MND Association has proposed a set of recommendations and highlighted examples of good practice in their recent report, A Lifeline Not a Luxury.
- One such recommendation is to speed up applications for the funding and installation of home adaptations. This would be hugely beneficial for people living with MND, who could live safely at home for longer, maintain their health and wellbeing for as long as possible, and remain engaged with their communities, family and friends. People living with MND do not have time to wait – every day is critical.
- This council recognises that people with progressive conditions should be able to apply for adaptations as early as possible following diagnosis, so that their future needs can be anticipated rather than responded to in crisis. This council also recognises that early interventions can save taxpayer money by enabling people to manage their condition more effectively and reducing the need for critical interventions at a later stage.

Council resolves to:

1. Request officers to review the fast-track process for delivering home adaptations for people with progressive or terminal conditions such as MND, and taking all necessary steps to ensure that actions within the Councils control are delivered as quickly as possible.
2. Include data on its DFG performance, which is captured in the Delta Balanced Scorecard published annually by MHCLG, in its existing Performance Reports, to also review how data on client satisfaction with completeness and timeliness of responses, and satisfaction overall can be collected.
3. Provide clear, accessible information to residents and families about the fast-track process, eligibility, and expected timeframes. Establish a named officer contact for urgent cases to support families through the process.
4. Ensure its Disabled Facilities Grant Policy has regard to the needs of those suffering from conditions such as MND to enable the right adaptations to be delivered as swiftly as possible."

Councillor Early suggested that the aim of the motion was to increase the speed and quality of this service to residents and advised that the alterations had been made following discussion with officers. Councillor Early noted that some of the data originally requested was managed by Oxfordshire County Council and would not have been possible to gather. However, the resolutions did involve gathering some data that would improve accountability. The inclusion

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of a named officer for urgent cases would help to deliver clear expectations on time frames for delivery of DFG.

The alteration of the original motion was accepted by the seconder, Councillor Andrew Prosser. There were no objections to the alteration from Members.

Councillor Andrew Prosser seconded the altered motion and stated that, even with LGR, it was important to put in place a marker for the urgency of action required in such cases.

Members debated the altered motion, and the following points were raised:

- All steps taken to speed up the DFG process for residents with MND was welcome. Delays in delivery had led to admissions to nursing homes in some cases.
- The motion could be extended to other conditions.
- There was a critical shortage of homes with suitable adaptations in place for people with MND and other conditions.
- Executive and Planning Committee Members were urged to liaise with the Planning Department to ensure housing developers included appropriately adapted homes in their delivery of new build sites.
- The definition of the word “urgent” in such cases was clarified as being part of the Occupational Therapist assessment which led to cases received priority.

Councillor Early summarised her motion by agreeing with Members who had suggested extending the motion beyond MND and the need to include adapted housing in new build developments. Councillor Early noted that the Council’s Home Improvement Officer had dealt with 459 applications in three years, this was considered to be good, however there was still room for improvement.

The motion was put to the vote as follows:

For 39, Against 0, Abstentions 0

Resolved: The Council

1. Requested officers to review the fast-track process for delivering home adaptations for people with progressive or terminal conditions such as MND, and taking all necessary steps to ensure that actions within the Councils control are delivered as quickly as possible.
2. Include data on its DFG performance, which is captured in the Delta Balanced Scorecard published annually by MHCLG, in its existing Performance Reports, to also

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review how data on client satisfaction with completeness and timeliness of responses, and satisfaction overall can be collected.

3. Provide clear, accessible information to residents and families about the fast-track process, eligibility, and expected timeframes. Establish a named officer contact for urgent cases to support families through the process.
4. Ensure its Disabled Facilities Grant Policy has regard to the needs of those suffering from conditions such as MND to enable the right adaptations to be delivered as swiftly as possible.

The Meeting closed at 3.49 pm

CHAIR