

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
1NB at 5.30 pm on **Wednesday, 4 March 2026**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Genny Early (Vice-Chair), Adam Clements, Steve Cosier, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Paul Marsh, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, Ruth Smith, 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), Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Alison Borrett (Senior Performance Analyst), Chris Hargraves (Head of Planning), Heather McCulloch (Community Wellbeing Manager) and Gemma Moreing (Business Information and Performance Lead)

Other Councillors in attendance: Hugo Ashton, Julian Cooper, Alaric Smith and Rachel Crouch

1 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments

Apologies were noted from Councillor Mark Walker and Councillor Dan Levy.

Apologies for lateness were noted from Councillor Ruth Smith.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Committee considered the minutes of the meeting held on 4 February 2026. The approval of the minutes was proposed by Councillor Michele Mead and seconded by Councillor Alistair Wray. This proposal was put to the vote and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 4 February 2026.

4 Chair's announcements

The Chair explained that he proposed to move the order of agenda items to deal with item 7: National Planning Policy Framework after the other substantive agenda items.

5 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

6 Report back on recommendations

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to the Executive's response to the Committees recommendations on Nature Recovery and Mental Health Initiatives.

7 2025/26 Quarterly Finance Review Q3

This was taken as first substantive item for pre-decision scrutiny.

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Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the 2025/26 Quarterly Finance Review Q3 report and highlighted:

- The overall underspend of £630k against the profiled budget.
- Development management income was up 70% on the previous year due to the receipt of major applications.
- Trade waste income was up 21%.
- Leisure contract had generated an additional £101k.
- There were no significant overspends.
- Treasury Management investment income was better than the budget due to interest rates being higher than expected.
- There were a number of variances in the capital programme but asset repairs and fleet purchases were expected soon.
- Two temporary accommodation properties had been acquired and a further six were in the pipeline.
- Capital developer contributions of £6m had been paid out.

The Committee asked questions and noted from the responses of the Head of Finance that:

- The purchase of temporary accommodation properties would result in savings in housing benefit, a conservate estimate was £350k per annum.
- The additional leisure income was a result of inflation being higher than expected.
- Money had been set aside for car park improvements, and some work (e.g. new signage) had already been undertaken.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and officers for their work and time. There were no recommendations to the Executive.

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2025/26 Quarterly Service Review Q3

The Committee considered the 2025/26 Quarterly Service Review Q3 report. The Leader introduced the report and highlighted that:

- There was now only one vacant unit at Marriotts Walk and public realm improvements would be coming forward soon.
- The Salt Cross Area Action Plan had been approved by full Council.
- The Woodford Way project was progressing with further plans to come forward in quarter I of 2026/27.
- Customer satisfaction was high.
- Shop front improvement grants were on track to be awarded.
- Leisure centre visits remained high.
- Planning applications were being determined in a timely fashion.
- Affordable housing delivery was above target.
- 100% of high-risk food premises had been inspected.
- Missed bin collections were within target.

The Senior Performance Analyst summarised the areas that were below target:

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- Processing times for Council Tax change events – this was a cumulative measure which had fallen below target in quarter 1.
- Processing times for housing benefit change of circumstances - the performance was skewed where people had failed to provide the requested documentation.

The Committee asked questions and noted from the responses that:

- Household recycling performance remained strong when compared nationally although there were concerns that the trend was that recycling was down and residual waste was up.
- The Council was looking at further recycling messaging and campaigning and what more could be done to encourage and facilitate recycling and make it simpler for residents.
- Officers would explore whether quality metrics could be included for disability grants, as well as processing times for fast-track applications.
- Council Tax and Business Rates collections needed to be reprofiled for next year to reflect the increase in people switching from 10 monthly payments to 12 monthly payments.
- Officers would consider the impact of Oxford City Council offering free bulky waste collections.
- Officers would consider whether the performance reports could be more prominent on the Council website.

The Chair thanked the Leader and officers for presenting the report and answering questions. There were no recommendations to the Executive.

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Approach to commissioning 3 year SLA 2027 onwards

The purpose of the report was to outline the principles, application process and timeline for the commissioning of three-year Service Level Agreements for Community Grants covering the period 2027-2030. It was included on the agenda for pre-decision scrutiny.

Councillor Rachel Crouch, Executive Member for Communities, introduced the report which was about sustaining investments into community services. In 2024 the Council had introduced a three-year service level agreement programme for community grants with funding of £396k plus a £167k top up. There were 8 programmes currently being delivered by 7 organisations. The current arrangements were due to end in 2027 so there was a need to prepare for the commissioning process now. No external funding would be available for the 2027-30 programme and it was recommended that the base budget be increased to match that for the previous three-year programme. There was a separate 3-year programme for Citizens Advice.

The Committee asked questions and noted from the responses that:

- The following groups had been supported: Wild Oxfordshire (2 projects), Chipping Norton Theatre, Age UK, Volunteer Link Up, the Low Carbon Hub, Homestart and the Wychwood Forest Trust.
- The programme was aligned with the Local Plan, the Nature Recovery Plan and the county-wide Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- Food and energy initiatives were expected to come forward but the details of schemes could not be predicated at this stage.

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- Supported organisations needed to be of a significant enough scale to handle the investments and manage projects effectively over time.
- Service Level Agreements would novate to a successor authority when new unitary council arrangements take effect and should be honoured. The new organisation(s) would then have time to make an evaluation and put any follow-on arrangements in place.
- Officers would consider how to make improvements in areas where the sustainability impact assessment was grey rather than green.
- There would be a robust procurement process, and officers had experience of working with organisations, setting KPIs and measuring performance.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and officers. There were no recommendations to the Executive.

10 National Planning Policy Framework: Proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system

The purpose of this item was to consider the Council's response to the Government's consultation on proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and other aspects of the planning system. It was included on the agenda for pre-decision scrutiny.

The Chair explained that the annex to the report (the Council's proposed response to the consultation) had been circulated as a later paper. Given the lack of time for members to read through the annex, it was suggested that any comments on it be forwarded to Democratic Services by Friday, for consideration ahead of the following Wednesday's Executive meeting.

The Executive Member for Planning apologised for the lateness of the annex and explained that it was important that the Council adds its voice to the national consultation.

The Head of Planning added that there was a lot of material in the consultation which had taken considerable time to digest but the most salient and impactful points were covered in the report. The proposed changes to the NPPF were quite radical but a lot of it was sensible and supportable. The status of the NPPF as a material consideration would remain unchanged but it would include a series of national policies. There were concerns including around:

- The impacts of new national policies on the ability of councils to set local standards.
- Less effective pre-application engagement.
- Reductions in supporting information provided with applications.
- An overly permissive approach to development, in particular within settlement boundaries.
- The upward push on housing numbers.
- The emphasis on building around railway stations at high density including in sensitive areas (other than in the green belt).
- A permissive approach to medium sized developments of 10-49 dwellings.
- Responsibility for major housing allocations (e.g. new settlements) sitting at a sub-regional level rather than at local plan level.

The Committee made a series of comments and suggestions which are set out in an annex to these minutes, together with the responses of the Head of Planning.

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The Committee agreed that its comments and suggestions, plus any additional comments received by Friday, would be submitted to the Executive on Wednesday 11 March 2026.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and officers for their work on the Council's response and said that the responses demonstrated a very strong understanding of the area and the issues it faces. It was suggested that a covering letter should be published alongside the consultation response to demonstrate the work the Council was doing to represent the interests of the district.

11 Updates from Task and Finish Groups

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to a written response from officers (attached to minutes) to questions about waste and recycling that had been asked at a previous meeting.

The Committee agreed to include an item on its work plan on encouraging recycling.

12 Committee Work Programme

The Chair proposed holding an additional meeting in June to consider the Local Plan separately from the other Executive reports for pre-decision scrutiny. This proposal was agreed by the Committee.

It was noted that an additional meeting had already been scheduled for 26 March 2026, which would be the final meeting of the current civic year.

13 Executive Work Programme

There were no comments on the Executive Work Programme.

The Chair thanked all attendees and closed the meeting.

The Meeting closed at 19:50

CHAIR