



PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 17 April 2026 commencing at 10.02 am and finishing at 1.15 pm.

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Glynis Phillips - in the Chair
Councillor Ian Middleton (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Brad Baines
Councillor Tom Greenaway
Councillor Kieron Mallon
Councillor John Shiri
Councillor Roz Smith
Councillor Ron Batstone

**Other Members in
Attendance:**

Councillor Tim Bearder, Cabinet Member for Adults
Councillor Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council
Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance,
Property and Transformation

Officers:

Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships
Tom Parsons, Head of Customer Experience
Clare Martin, Strategic Improvement Lead
Richard Merritt, Operational Manager Contact Oxfordshire
Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets
James Cater, National Management Trainee
Lorna Baxter, Deputy Chief Executive and S.151 Officer
Karen Fuller, Director of Adult Social Services
Victoria Baran, Deputy Director of Adult Social Care
Stephen Rowles, Strategic Finance Business Partner
Isabel Rockingham, Head of Joint Commissioning HC Age Well
Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance

The Council considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda and reports, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

10/26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from the following:

- Cllr Boucher-Giles

- Cllr Ley (for whom Cllr Batstone was substituting)

11/26 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

12/26 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The minutes of the meeting on the 16 January 2026 were **AGREED** as a true and accurate record subject to the following amendment:

- Strengthening reference to the Committee's wish to see the options appraisal undertaken in relation to the Watlington Relief Road.

13/26 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 4)

The Scrutiny Officer read out a statement sent through from the Chair of Shirburn Parish Meeting, Mr Parker in relation to the Watlington Relief Road. The issues raised concerned the status of the planning consent and budget implications arising, the absence of a Cabinet report relating to the item, and the scheme's designation as an 'active travel' scheme.

The Committee **NOTED** the address.

14/26 CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE UPDATE

(Agenda No. 5)

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships, Tom Parsons, Head of Customer Experience, Clare Martin, Strategic Improvement Lead, and Richard Merritt, Operational Manager Contact Oxfordshire attended the committee to present an update report on the Customer Service Centre.

Councillor Levy introduced the Customer Experience service update. The Council had prioritised enabling residents to contact the authority through channels that suited them, supported by investment in online and telephone systems. Officers introduced the customer experience team and the redesigned had gone live on 1 February, with management layers streamlined and additional capacity added in workforce planning and complaints to improve response times and learning. The service had been structured around customer feedback (complaints/FOI/MP enquiries), a contact centre covering communities and neighbourhoods (excluding adult social care), a dedicated social and health care 'front door' for adult social care, and a small strategic improvements function focused on customer journeys and working with Zoom. A major demand spike linked to the temporary congestion charge was highlighted, which included handling around 15,000 emails handled in six weeks. The focus had been on reducing avoidable 'chase' calls and switchboard misrouting,

and that new Zoom reporting had provided better insight than low response-rate satisfaction surveys, alongside reduced waiting times.

In response to the report received and introduction given, members of the committee began their questioning.

Members sought to know how AI had been used to help answer the high volume of enquiries, and what impact this had had on staff wellbeing. Officers said AI functionality within the new Zoom platform had surfaced relevant information from the council's knowledge base (including web content and training materials) to advisers during calls, helping them provide faster and more accurate answers. AI had also been used to analyse call sentiment and engagement across all interactions, and that virtual-agent technology had supported intent-based routing and reduced switchboard demand and customer waiting time. On wellbeing, officers said the peak period had strengthened teamwork and morale, with staff working flexibly to manage demand, and they said a positive workplace culture had been promoted.

Clarification of the service level targets (SLAs), which issues had affected achievement, and whether there had been major drivers of contact other than the temporary congestion charge. Officers said SLAs had been set as the proportion of calls answered within a specified time and had been tailored by service to reflect average call length, rather than applying a single '80/20' industry standard. Adult social care calls were typically lengthy (often around 40 minutes and sometimes significantly longer), so the SLA had been set at 70% answered within five minutes, whereas more transactional lines (including general enquiries) had operated to shorter SLAs and generally performed strongly. Performance had varied predictably by day and time and could not be fully controlled because customer calling patterns clustered. On other drivers, the overall service-level figure had been pulled down primarily by adult social care telephony due to call complexity, safeguarding contacts and the need for strengths-based conversations at the start of care pathways; if adult social care was separated out, performance for other teams would have been higher.

Members sought to know what feedback the service had received from staff when leaving the team (either leaving the council or moving to other roles), whether turnover created operational challenges, how these were managed, and whether the service wanted people to stay. Officers viewed progression from the contact centre into other council roles as a positive outcome, and that most leavers moved internally (notably into Adult Social Care roles such as commissioning and brokerage, and into Highways), reflecting the transferable knowledge gained in the contact centre. Turnover could create pressure because vacancies could arise quickly and some service areas were complex to learn, but they had managed this through maintaining a pool of casual staff. The team benefited from a wide age range and flexible working arrangements, including apprenticeships and roles for disabled staff.

Members asked about the level of preventative activity to reduce call volumes. Officers explained calls had been reduced by using the Zoom Virtual Agent to route customers correctly first time and to answer routine questions without adviser intervention. Traditional push-button phone menu had been replaced with intent-based voice routing, so callers could describe what they needed in their own words, which had reduced switchboard 'general enquiries' demand and avoided double-

handling. This approach had also reduced time spent navigating phone menus by around half. In addition, web chat bots had been deployed on key webpages (including the congestion charge and school admissions) to provide answers drawn from the council's knowledge base and website content, with an option to transfer quickly to a person where required. Officers added that they had used call transcripts and contact data to identify common queries, refine the bots, and feed back issues with online systems to service owners to reduce avoidable contact.

Further information was sought on the impact the introduction of AI agents had had on the customer experience team, including whether staff might have been concerned about jobs being replaced, and he also raised the need for transparency and for considering environmental impacts. Officers said they had involved staff in developing the AI tools and had been clear that they were intended to deflect routine contact, but that this would have changed the role rather than removed it, by enabling advisers to focus on more complex cases and customers who needed more support. Staff had been re-skilled as transactional queries were handled through virtual agents, and that the system had helped advisers by surfacing relevant guidance during calls and by providing better insight into why customers contacted the council. Customers could still speak to a person, and that they would have continued to monitor feedback and performance data but officers acknowledged the need to be explicit to ensure that customers were speaking to a virtual agent.

The Committee pressed further on how the council had ensured transparency given that voice bots could sound realistic. It was suggested that virtual agents should begin by stating that they were not a real person and explaining how to reach a human adviser. In response, officers said that, for the congestion charge voice bot, callers had already come through an automated system and the service had announced that the interaction was with a virtual agent. This approach would be the model for future virtual agents, and confirmed that customers could ask to speak to a person and would be transferred through without challenge.

Members sought to know what feedback there was on customer satisfaction with AI bot implementation. It had been early days but there had been little negative feedback, with staff reporting generally positive comments. Officers had reviewed transcripts and early data, and significant internal and user-group testing had been undertaken to ensure the system worked for people with different needs and to avoid callers becoming trapped in loops.

Finally, members asked what support was available for residents who came into County Hall for support, and where the 'front door' would be located when the council left County Hall before moving into Speedwell House. Officers said the County Hall reception team had been part of the contact centre and had supported residents and visitors in person for the services delivered by the contact centre, with staff presence available each day. The contact centre did not cover every council service, there had been no general appointment system, and County Hall had not been designed for confidential 'walk-in' conversations, which had created challenges when residents sought support for services outside the contact centre. The intention for Speedwell House had been to provide a more suitable resident hub with appropriate privacy, and they had explored options such as a video kiosk to enable residents to speak to other council teams remotely.

The Committee **AGREED** to make the following recommendation to Cabinet:

- That the Cabinet ensures that there is full transparency over whether a caller to the Council is interacting with an AI bot or a human

The Committee also **AGREED** to request the following additional information:

- Performance stats broken across the different CSC teams
- An estimate of how much time have the Council has given back to Oxfordshire residents because the improvements made have reduced the time they are left waiting on hold
- Details of the sustainability impacts of the use of AI bots
- A breakdown of the things that people seek help for from the CSC when they physically come into County Hall

15/26 DEVOLUTION UPDATE (Agenda No. 6)

The Committee were provided the Devolution Update by Cllr Leffman, Kim Sawyer, Programme Director for Devolution, having been called away to an urgent meeting.

Cllr Leffman noted that there had been limited progress since the last update to the Committee because the matter remained under consideration by the Secretary of State. Thames Valley leaders had submitted an expression of interest to the Minister for Devolution for a Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA), although they had preferred to pursue a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). She explained that ministers had indicated an MSA could only follow after establishing an FSA, via a joint committee and related governance arrangements. Legislation was expected to go through Parliament in May. Cllr Leffman reported that a decision on which areas would proceed had been expected that week but had been delayed until after the May elections, following additional submissions about the proposed geography. She added that while there had been interest in including Buckinghamshire, it had not wished to participate at that stage, though ministers had expected it to align with a Thames Valley authority in due course. It was anticipated that the situation would be clearer by June, when the committee could be updated on the government's plans for the Thames Valley.

Following the introduction, the Committee commenced its questions.

Members sought more information about whether the intention was for Swindon to included as part of the Thames Valley Strategic Authority. Cllr Leffman said that officials had indicated that government wished Swindon to be included, consistent with the Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) geography. Central government officials had sought assurance that the Thames Valley partners would work with Swindon, and that she, together with the leaders of West Berkshire and Wokingham, had provided a statement to the Minister confirming their intention to work in partnership with Swindon if that was the Minister's direction. However, there were

strong differences of opinion across Thames Valley partners on the desirability of including Swindon within the future Thames Valley strategic authority.

Given the benefits of an MSA, members sought to clarify whether it was possible to proceed directly to an MSA without first becoming a FSA. In response, Cllr Leffman said ministers had indicated that it would not be possible to move straight to an MSA, and that the forthcoming legislation required areas to begin as a FSAs. She added that leaders still sought clarification on what this would mean in practice, including the timetable for progressing to an MSA, and that the Minister had agreed to attend a leaders' meeting after the elections to discuss those questions.

Members sought to understand more about the proposed governance arrangements for the FSA. Cllr Leffman said officers had begun considering the governance arrangements, including the establishment of a joint committee, and she expected a clearer proposal to be brought back to the committee in June once government's arrangements were confirmed. She said representation was being considered on a population basis, with an initial suggestion of two representatives for Oxfordshire, one for each Berkshire authority, and two for Buckinghamshire if it joined. Further information would depend on the forthcoming legislation, which was due to go to Parliament in May.

In view of Swindon's absence from the Thames Valley Integrated Care Board (ICB), members questioned the rationale for a devolution geography that would not align with existing public-sector footprints. In response, Cllr Leffman said Thames Valley Liberal Democrat leaders had raised these concerns with the Minister, noting that Swindon was not coterminous with the ICB, Thames Valley Police or the fire service, and that including Swindon would therefore require significant cross-boundary changes. Ministers, nonetheless, had indicated they still expected Swindon to be included. Members expressed concerns over the loss of synergies, strategic clarity and inflexibility of including areas which were not co-terminous with existing public sector geographies such as the Fire, Police and Health services.

More information was sought on how the council's budgeted funding for the SDS would relate to the emerging devolution arrangements, including whether the SDS work would be undertaken jointly across the wider multi-authority area. Concerns were also raised about managing political and geographic differences within any future FSA. In response, Cllr Leffman said the Thames Valley authorities had worked constructively across party lines and had remained committed to progressing the arrangements, notwithstanding differing views on Swindon. She said government had indicated that around £400m would be available through the SDS process, including funding for infrastructure, and that the councils therefore needed to take the work forward. She added that Buckinghamshire had been expected by government to be part of the SDS discussions and was likely to participate, given the scale of the opportunity, and that further clarity was expected by June following the conclusion of the SDS consultation and a further meeting with the Minister.

The Committee **AGREED** to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- That the Cabinet should adopt and promote the position that there is immense value in having the future strategic authority share coterminous borders with existing public sector geographies.
- That the Cabinet works with partners to ensure that the Thames Valley Strategic Authority becomes a Mayoral Strategic Authority as early as is possible.

16/26 COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER POLICY (Agenda No. 7)

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets, and James Cater, National Management Trainee presented a report on the draft Community Asset Transfer Policy prior to its consideration by Cabinet.

Councillor Levy explained that the Council had historically dealt with community groups' use of County Council property on an ad hoc basis and had sought to formalise the process to make it clearer for the public and for groups wishing to use, lease or take on Council property. He said a two-part policy had been developed, covering community asset transfer and community leasing, to set out how the Council would offer more favourable terms to eligible community groups than to commercial tenants, and invited officers to present the detail and answer questions.

Officers said the community asset transfer policy had been redeveloped and split into two parts: asset transfer (including transfer at less than best consideration in recognition of social value) and community leasing. They said a cross-council working group had been established to assess applications and to identify properties for transfer or lease, bringing together property, community wealth building and relevant service leads to improve coordination. They outlined transparent assessment criteria focused on social value, support to statutory services, investment in the property, financial management and local community benefit, and said rent concessions had been determined on a case-by-case basis (including peppercorn rent where appropriate). VCS engagement had been undertaken via a survey and webinar, which had informed clarifications on revenue caps, expanded criteria, openness to 10+ year leases, subletting permissions, proportionate reporting and tenant obligations.

In response to the presentation and report, the Committee raised a number of questions and points of clarification.

It was suggested that the Community Asset Transfer Working Group might be under-resourced, and could benefit from public health, finance and legal attendees, as well as a more flexible meeting schedule.

The Committee discussed how different tenants could be treated consistently, including those who had existing arrangements under a different policy, and after local government reorganisation. In response, officers stated that there were relatively few existing arrangements and that they had reviewed current leases; when existing leases ended, renewals and any reapplications would be assessed through the same policy framework and working group process, so that tenants were treated

consistently. Officers would communicate and engage with current voluntary and community sector partners to ensure they understood the new process and could prepare for renewal. Officers had also liaised with district councils and that, following any Local Government Reorganisation, policies and processes would be reviewed and realigned by the new authority, with the intention of maintaining broadly aligned principles and consistent outcomes across areas.

Members wished to know whether non-VCS organisations would be eligible to apply under the policy. It was confirmed that non-VCS community projects could apply under the policy, but VCS organisations would be prioritised where there were competing applications.

Greater information was sought over whether a community asset transfer was a full transfer of ownership or a long lease. In response, officers said asset transfer had been a transfer of the asset and responsibility for its management to a charitable organisation, but it would have been subject to conditions requiring the property to be used to deliver the agreed community services and social benefit. The arrangement would not continue if the agreed use ceased or the organisation sought to dispose of the property, and the property would return to the council under the same conditions. Officers had discussed the approach with legal colleagues, but that the detailed legal framework would have been developed on a case-by-case basis and was not set out in the policy; the committee suggested that clearer wording should have been added.

Concern was raised that the CAT policy might put the long term survival of organisations in the hands of the Council. In response, officers said leases and agreements would be subject to ongoing review, including annual financial information and service updates from the organisations, and that the council would work with groups to support delivery of the agreed social benefits. Longer leases could help organisations secure external grant funding, and that where circumstances or the agreed purpose changed, the matter would be reviewed and discussed accordingly.

The Committee requested details of the process to take on dilapidated or buildings of an inadequate standard, such as Wood Farm. Officers said the council would not have transferred or leased a dilapidated building that was not fit for purpose without conditions. Where a community organisation was willing and able to invest to bring a building up to standard, this would have been reflected in the lease terms and rent level (including the potential for a peppercorn rent). Where an organisation could not fund the works and the council still intended to lease the building, officers said the council would remain responsible as landlord for making the property fit for purpose. It was highlighted that the council would not have invested in a property until a decision had been made on its future, and that disposal would have been a last resort where there was no service or community need.

Members queried whether the proposed community asset transfer and community leasing policies were consistent with the CLES report and its recommendations. The policies did not fully address wider place-shaping considerations for the disposal of council assets, particularly land and non-VCS disposals, and the council needed clearer, value-led guidance to prioritise social value outcomes (including affordable and social housing) alongside best value. In response, Councillor Levy agreed in

principle that community value should be considered, but said the Council still had an overriding obligation to secure best value and generate income to support services, with limited scope to take account of social benefit. Local Government Reorganisation was expected to bring landownership and housing responsibilities together in a new authority, which should strengthen the ability to deliver wider social objectives through land and asset decisions.

The Committee **AGREED** to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- That the Cabinet amends the CAT policy to make explicit reference to the sale of land
- That the Cabinet provides in the CAT policy fuller explanation of the approach taken in relation to transfers of dilapidated buildings
- That the Cabinet provides within the policy greater detail of the legal framework and process surrounding the transfer of ownership
- That the Cabinet reviews the operation of the Community Asset Transfer and Community Leasing Working Group with a view to increasing the resourcing to support it, broadening the membership to include Finance, Legal and Public Health colleagues, and making the regularity of its meetings more flexible.
- That the Cabinet ensures the property team works with relevant other Council departments to develop common definitions of 'social value' across teams
- That the Cabinet provides clarification over its social value priorities, to enable proactive place-shaping with regards to land and assets
- That the Cabinet ensures the property team are aware of and, as far as possible, in alignment with approaches taken by Oxfordshire's district and city councils with a view to avoiding creating inconsistencies following the upcoming unitarisation(s) under Local Government Reorganisation
- That the Cabinet ensures that there is a consistency of approach towards leases and transfers granted under the proposed policy and existing leases when they come up for renewal

17/26 BMMR (ADULT SOCIAL CARE FOCUS)
(Agenda No. 8)

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, Councillor Tim Bearder, Cabinet Member for Adults, Lorna Baxter, Deputy Chief Executive and S.151 Officer, Karen Fuller, Director of Adult Social Services, Victoria Baran, Deputy Director of Adult Social Care, Stephen Rowles, Strategic Finance Business Partner, Isabel Rockingham, Head of Joint Commissioning HC Age Well, and Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance attended to present the Business Management and Monitoring Report, focusing on Adult Social Care.

Councillor Bearder said the item was brought forward due to the Adult Social Care forecast overspend, which had been around £8m earlier in the year but had reduced to around £4m following mitigation work. Pressures reflected the demand-led nature of the service, including more complex presentations and hospital discharge costs. He also highlighted additional costs from the collapse of NRS (the council's equipment provider). Work continued to stabilise the position by year end.

Officers explained that the business management and monitoring report had summarised the council's finance, performance and risk position, and that separate capital monitoring and outturn reports had updated progress on the capital programme. The extract before the committee had focused on Adult Services and had formed part of a series of service-focused updates. The figures reflected the position previously considered by Cabinet in March and were based on the January monitoring position, with a revised and improved outturn position due to be reported to Cabinet in June. Officers highlighted key adult-services-related capital schemes, including the residential accommodation programme, an update on the supported homes investment, and the passthrough of Disabled Facilities Grant funding to district councils. It was noted that the January forecast had taken a prudent approach and that mitigating actions had been taken to prevent recurring pressures in 2026/27, including through application of monies from the Better Care Fund and the agreed budget. The Director of Adult Social Care said the service had maintained close financial oversight through regular management reviews, reported continued success in discharge-to-assess and 'home first' arrangements with higher numbers of people supported to return home, and noted increased complexity and intensity of need. She also reported progress on reducing unsecured debt, including proactive work on deprivation of assets and recovery action through the courts.

In response to the introduction and on the basis of the report, committee members raised a number of queries.

More information was sought on the high number of discharges. Officers said the increased discharge numbers reflected a shift towards supporting more people to return home, rather than moving into care homes, with additional home-care capacity provided in the early days after discharge. They reported that this had followed joint work with commissioners and providers to strengthen the discharge-to-assess pathways, enabling higher throughput (with seasonal variation). The overall number of people delayed in hospital had broadly stabilised, but the number of days of delay had reduced as the discharge process had accelerated.

Members asked why a £3.5m cost pressure was evident so early on the year and why it had not been included within the Council's budget.

Officers explained that the figure had been based on the January position and had been subject to change through in-year reconciliations, including changes in individuals' circumstances and the impact of backdated continuing healthcare payments from the Integrated Care Board. The budget process timetable had meant the increase had not been fully evident when the budget had been set, and that the service had expected some one-off 2025/26 costs to fall away in 2026/27. The issue was expected to be managed through in-year budget realignment within Adult Social Care, and that a small number of high-cost cases (including transitions) could materially affect the position.

Councillor Shiri left the meeting at this point.

Members sought more information on the trajectory of numbers of individuals in care. Officers said the number of people in residential care had continued to reduce, but at a slower rate than previously, reflecting increasing complexity and intensity of need.

They noted that around 54% of care home residents were self-funders and that recent increases in placements had been driven largely by the self-funding market, including individuals who had placed themselves without council involvement. They said the council had continued to support eligible people to move from care homes into extra care housing or supported living where appropriate, and that work had been underway with Age UK Oxfordshire and the care association to improve information and choices for self-funders. They also highlighted the opening of a new extra care housing scheme in Faringdon as part of the longer-term strategy, and said that residential and nursing care had remained focused on people with the highest levels of dependency whose needs could not be met through extra care housing or care at home.

Discussion was held over the degree to which adult social care could be influenced at a local level or whether the primary determinants lay with demographics and central government.

In response to a question about the implications of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and learning from neighbouring areas, Cllr Bearder said the eventual model remained a ministerial decision, but noted concerns arising from LGR proposals elsewhere. He cited Essex, where a single adult social care function had been proposed to be split into five, and said the authority had pursued judicial review. He said such fragmentation risked duplicating senior capacity (including multiple Directors of Adult Social Services and deputy posts), splitting contracts and commissioning arrangements, and undermining established integrated pathways. He added that Oxfordshire's current approach relied on close working with acute hospitals and a single discharge pathway and pooled budget arrangements, which could become more complex if responsibilities were divided across multiple new authorities.

Members discussed the challenges of recruitment, the desirability of being able to recruit locally during a time of increased youth unemployment.

Councillor Mallon left the meeting at this point.

The Committee made no recommendations to Cabinet.

18/26 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER (Agenda No. 9)

The Committee **NOTED** the action and recommendation tracker.

19/26 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN (Agenda No. 10)

The Committee **AGREED** the proposed work programme.

20/26 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS (Agenda No. 11)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet responses to the reports on:

- BMMR – CEF Focus
- Budget Proposals for 2026/27 to 2030/31

And the draft responses from Cabinet relating to reports on:

- BMMR – Public Health Focus
- Parking Permits
- Social Value

..... in the Chair

Date of signing