CABINET

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 14 July 2026 commencing at 2.00 pm and finishing at 4.07 pm

Present:

Voting Members:	Councillor Tim Bearder – in the Chair Councillor Neil Fawcett (Deputy Chair) Councillor Gareth Epps Councillor Rebekah Fletcher Councillor Sean Gaul Councillor Laura Gordon Councillor Kate Gregory Councillor Liz Leffman Councillor Dan Levy
Other Members in Attendance:	Councillors Thomas Ashby, Liz Brighouse OBE, Lee Evans, Jane Hanna OBE, Glynis Phillips, Paul-Austin Sargent, Liam Walker

Officers:

Whole of meeting	Lorna Baxter (Deputy Chief Executive – Section 151 Officer), Anita Bradley (Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer), Paul Fermer (Director of Environment and Highways), Delia Mann (Deputy Director Children's Social Care), Robin Rogers (Director of Economy and Place), Susannah Wintersgill (Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships), Jack Ahier (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Cabinet considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting, and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda, reports and schedule, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

91/26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

(Agenda Item. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Edwards.

92/26 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(Agenda Item. 2)

There were none.

93/26 MINUTES
(Agenda Item. 3)

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2026 were approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

94/26 QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS
(Agenda Item. 4)

Please see attached.

95/26 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS
(Agenda Item. 5)

8 – Best Start Family Hubs
Cllr Jane Hanna OBE

12 – Cowley Branch Line – Enterprise Zone Funding
Rita Atkinson
Cllr Andrew Crawford
Cllr Bethia Thomas
Cllr Jane Hanna OBE

14 – Procurement of a Strategic Partner to Support Local Government Reorganisation across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire
Cllr Glynis Phillips

18 – Capital Programme Monitoring Report
Richard Drew

96/26 APPOINTMENTS
(Agenda Item. 6)

There were none.

97/26 REPORTS FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEES
(Agenda Item. 7)

Councillor Liz Brighouse OBE, Chair of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, presented the report on the Best Start in Life Family Hubs.

Councillor Glynis Phillips, Chair of the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, presented reports on:

- Commercial Strategy
- Shaping Oxfordshire’s Future Economy

Councillor Liam Walker, Chair of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, presented the report on the Protocol for Flag Flying.

Cabinet received the reports and will respond in due course.

98/26 BEST START FAMILY HUBS

(Agenda Item. 8)

Cabinet had before it a report setting out the strategic direction for the Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire as a core delivery mechanism in the Council's Best Start in Life Plan, which responded to the national ambition for 75% of children to achieve a good level of development by age five by 2028.

Councillor Sean Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, introduced the report and outlined proposals for a network of family hubs operating across five localities, supported by voluntary, community and faith sector organisations. Particular emphasis was placed on improving outcomes for children and families, supporting school readiness and tackling inequalities.

Members highlighted the importance of partnership working, the contribution of community-run family centres and opportunities for integration with wider health and wellbeing services, whilst welcoming ongoing discussions regarding provision in Wantage and Grove.

Councillor Gaul moved and Councillor Gregory seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:

a) **Approve the strategic direction of travel for Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire and delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services for the delivery of the proposal, including the expenditure of the Department for Education (DfE) Grant and budget.**

99/26 CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY UPDATE

(Agenda Item. 9)

Cabinet received a report which provided an update on the progress and continued engagement related to the recommendations from the February-March 2025 Oxfordshire Travel and Transport Citizens' Assembly, highlighting the council's positive response, further workshops on specific transport projects such as the temporary Oxford congestion charge and OxRAIL 2040 plan, and ongoing efforts to involve assembly members in policy development and scheme delivery aligned with the county's strategic goals for greener, healthier, and fairer transport systems.

Councillor Gareth Epps, Cabinet Member for Transport, presented the report. He reported that many recommendations were already being progressed through existing transport programmes and highlighted work on behaviour change, road safety, reducing traffic, improvements to Park and Ride services and continued engagement with Assembly members on congestion charging and OxRail 2040 proposals.

Members thanked participants and acknowledged the value of deliberative engagement in informing transport policy.

Councillor Bearder moved and Councillor Epps seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESLVED to:-

a) **Note the progress being made to deliver against recommendations from the Travel and Transport Citizens' Assembly since July 2025.**

b) **Note the additional engagement that has taken place with assembly members over the past year, in support of deeper involvement of communities in transport policy development, and scheme design and delivery.**

100/26 THAMES VALLEY SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (SDS) DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

(Agenda Item. 10)

Cabinet considered a report recommending approval for establishing a partnership of councils from Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Swindon to collaboratively develop a pre-inception Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for the Thames Valley area. The report outlined governance, funding, staffing, data sharing, and risk management arrangements ahead of the statutory Strategic Planning Board's formation expected in Autumn 2026, with Bracknell Forest Council acting as the accountable body and host for staff, supported by government funding and partner contributions to ensure readiness for the SDS statutory requirements by mid-2029.

Councillor Laura Gordon, Cabinet Member for Environment and Economy, presented the report.

Cabinet noted that the SDS was a government-imposed process, with the geography set to include Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Swindon, but not Buckinghamshire or Milton Keynes. Members expressed concerns about the logic of the boundaries and the practical implications for strategic planning.

Members clarified that participation in the SDS did not imply acceptance of a devolution deal including Swindon, and that spatial planning and devolution were being treated as separate processes. The importance of including Buckinghamshire for effective planning was reiterated.

Councillor Gordon moved and Councillor Gaul seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:-

a) **Approve the establishment of a partnership with the councils covering Oxfordshire and Berkshire, including Swindon in the initial pre-inception period of the statutory Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for the Thames Valley area and pending agreement by Government on geography.**

b) **Note the funding and resource allocations for the pre-inception programme.**

c) **Agree that Bracknell Forest Council will act as the accountable body for funds held on behalf of the partnership and will host any staff appointed for the Thames Valley SDS programme.**

d) **Agree the high-level interim governance and oversight, monitoring and assurance arrangements set out in this paper, covering the arrangements for the period before a statutory Strategic Planning Board (SPB) is established through secondary legislation.**

e) **To delegate the detail of the agreement and working arrangements for pre-inception development of the SDS to the Director of Economy and Place in consultation with the Head of Legal and Governance and Deputy Monitoring Officer.**

101/26 THE OXFORDSHIRE INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY (OXIS)

(Agenda Item. 11)

Cabinet had before it the 2026 Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OxIS) Stage 2 Prioritisation Report outlining the strategic infrastructure needed to support Oxfordshire’s projected growth to 2050. The report identified key challenges in transport, energy, digital connectivity, water, green spaces, and social infrastructure, while highlighting a £7.6 billion funding gap out of the £9 billion required, and presenting a flexible, evidence-based prioritisation framework for over 550 projects to guide investment and sustainable development aligned with the county’s 2050 Strategic Vision.

Councillor Laura Gordon, Cabinet Member for Environment and Economy, presented the report.

During discussion, members discussed the importance of clear infrastructure priorities to support Oxfordshire’s significant growth in jobs and housing, noting that infrastructure delivery has lagged behind development. They referenced the need for basic infrastructure such as renewable energy connections and water management.

Concerns were raised about the rigidity of the current project scoring system, with calls for more flexibility to ensure equitable distribution of funding and the ability to respond to strategic opportunities. Cabinet agreed to add recommendations emphasising flexibility and the need for nuanced prioritisation, especially regarding job and housing co-location.

Members also highlighted the lack of focus on climate adaptation in the current strategy and the need to consider alternative funding mechanisms, such as land value capture. They agreed that future iterations should place greater emphasis on climate mitigation, adaptation, and sustainable funding.

Councillor Gordon moved and Councillor Fawcett seconded the amended recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to :-

a) **Endorse the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy Stage 2 Prioritisation Report (provided at Annex 1)**

b) **Note the need for flexibility in bringing forward projects for funding to ensure equitable distribution of funding around the County and take advantage of strategic funding opportunities as they arise.**

c) **Ensure that future iterations of this report or other infrastructure prioritisation exercises, such as the Spatial Development Strategy, place stronger emphasis on: job creation in priority locations; housing development in priority locations (notably Oxford City); climate mitigation and adaptation; and alignment with Oxfordshire County Council transport and other policies.**

102/26 COWLEY BRANCH LINE - ENTERPRISE ZONE FUNDING

(Agenda Item. 12)

Cabinet had before it a report recommending approval of up to £14.5m in local funding for the Cowley Branch Line project using retained business rates from Oxfordshire Enterprise Zones, with repayment expected from future S106 and CIL contributions, while acknowledging potential funding risks and deferring the choice of financing method to future councils amid Local Government Reform.

Councillor Laura Gordon, Cabinet Member for Environment and Economy presented the report. She stated that the funding would unlock substantial Government and private-sector investment and contribute to economic growth across Oxfordshire. She also acknowledged concerns about consultation arrangements and outlined proposals for an Enterprise Zone Advisory Board.

During discussion, members emphasised the strategic importance of the scheme for OxRail 2040, Oxford station capacity, Oxfordshire Metro ambitions and future rail projects, including Warren Grove/Wantage station aspirations.

Members generally supported the proposal while acknowledging stakeholder concerns.

Further discussion covered the following points:-

- benefits for deprived communities in East Oxford;
- countywide economic impacts;
- future governance arrangements for EZ funding;
- progress on active travel schemes and Science Vale projects;
- future recovery of costs from developer contributions and infrastructure funding streams;

Councillor Gordon moved and Councillor Epps seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:-

a) **Approve potential funding to meet up to £14.5m of local costs for the delivery of the Cowley Branch Line through the use of retained business rates funding from the two Oxfordshire Enterprise Zones as set out in paragraph 44 and subject to the provisions of paragraph 41.**

b) **Note that the expectation is that this forward funding would be replaced by future S106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) contributions but neither the amounts nor timing are certain at this stage.**

c) **Note that any future shortfall in funding or additional borrowing costs beyond those set out in this paper would need a further decision on how to manage.**

103/26 OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S PROTOCOL FOR FLAG FLYING

(Agenda Item. 13)

Cabinet had before it a report proposing a Protocol for Flag Flying to establish a consistent framework for flag displays on council properties, ensuring compliance with legislation, supporting community cohesion, and managing one-off requests fairly and transparently.

Councillor Neil Fawcett, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Resources, presented the report.

During discussion, members welcomed the amendments to the policy proposed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Fawcett moved and Councillor Bearder seconded the recommendation, and it was approved.

RESOLVED to approve the Protocol for Flag Flying (Annex A to the report). The Protocol incorporates recommendations made by the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

104/26 PROCUREMENT OF A STRATEGIC PARTNER TO SUPPORT LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION ACROSS OXFORDSHIRE AND WEST BERKSHIRE

(Agenda Item. 14)

Cabinet considered a report recommending approval of a procurement exercise to appoint a Strategic Partner to support Local Government Reorganisation across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with an estimated contract value of £3 million starting September 2026 until March 2029 or 12 months post-vesting day, sharing costs 80/20 between Oxfordshire County Council and partner councils. This partner would provide specialist capacity for both statutory transition and system-wide transformation to achieve financially sustainable unitary authorities and improved service integration, with procurement conducted competitively under the Procurement Act 2023 and contract management ensuring risk mitigation and alignment with equality, sustainability, and legal requirements.

Councillor Tim Bearder, Leader of the Council, presented the report.

During discission, members discussed references to West Berkshire, noting uncertainty pending Government decisions on future local government structures. Cabinet agreed amendments to ensure flexibility pending those decisions and removed references to an unagreed cost-sharing formula.

Councillor Bearder moved and Councillor Leffman seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:-

a) **Approve the commencement of a procurement exercise to appoint a Strategic Partner to support the delivery of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) across the Oxfordshire (and West Berkshire) councils involved in scope, supporting both the statutory transition to new unitary arrangements and wider transformation objectives across the system;**

b) **Approve the commencement of procurement on the basis of an estimated contract value in the region of £3.0 million, with the contract expected to commence in September 2026 and run until March 2029 or 12 months following vesting day, whichever is later. The proposed costs will be tested and refined through the procurement process, with final costs confirmed prior to contract award. Costs will be shared in accordance with the cost-sharing agreement between the councils involved in the scope of Local Government Reorganisation for relevant LGR-related work.**

c) **Delegate authority to the Chief Executive (in his capacity as LGR Oxfordshire and West Berkshire System Implementation Team Leader), following completion of the procurement process and subject to all required approvals, to take all necessary steps to award and enter into the contract, provided that the final arrangement remains within the contract value and duration parameters set out in this report. Any proposed arrangement outside those parameters would be reported back to Cabinet for approval.**

105/26 TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT
(Agenda Item. 15)

Cabinet considered the Treasury Management Annual Performance Report for 2025/26 detailing the council's debt and investment activities.

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation presented the report. He stated that all treasury management activity had remained within approved prudential indicators. The Council had reduced external debt, generated strong investment returns and maintained a cautious approach to risk.

Councillor Levy moved and Councillor Gregory seconded the recommendation, and it was approved.

RESOLVED to note the council's treasury management activity and outcomes in 2025/26.

106/26 BUSINESS MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING REPORT
(Agenda Item. 16)

Cabinet received a report which set out the initial revenue forecast and expected outlook for the financial year 2026-27 and included updates on:

- financial risks which are being managed in 2026/27;
- savings and investment position; and
- funding notified since the budget was agreed.

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, presented the report. He explained that services were forecasting to remain within budget at month two, while acknowledging financial pressures in social care, highways and pay negotiations.

Councillor Levy moved and Councillor Gregory seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:-

a) **Note the report and appendixes.**

b) **Note the increases to funding following the final settlement (paragraph 21)**

c) **Approve the resulting contribution to general balances of £4m (para 36).**

d) **Approve the creation of an earmarked reserve to manage fluctuations in commercial income (para 35).**

e) **Approve the new Highways fees and charges commencing on 1 August 2026 (para 38 appendix 5)**

107/26 BUDGET AND BUSINESS PLANNING REPORT

(Agenda Item. 17)

Cabinet had before it the County Council's 2027/28 budget report which outlined the need to set a balanced budget amid funding reductions from the Fair Funding Review 2.0, with a medium-term financial strategy extending to 2031/32 and a capital programme to 2036/37. The report addressed service demands, inflation, council tax increases, and risks including social care pressures and Dedicated Schools Grant deficits, while planning for Local Government Reform in 2028 and engaging public consultation, with final budget approval scheduled for February 2027.

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation presented the report.

Councillor Levy moved and Councillor Gregory seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:-

a) **Note the report and the starting point for the 2027/28 budget;**

b) **Approve a five-year period for the medium-term financial strategy to 2031/32 and ten-year period for the capital programme to 2036/37;**

c) **Note the high-level timetable for the budget process.**

d) **Note the requirement for the Council to set a sustainable balanced budget for 2027/28 which shows how income will equal spending plans.**

108/26 CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING REPORT

(Agenda Item. 18)

Cabinet received a report which provided an update and monitoring on the County Council's 2026/27 Capital Programme, detailing an increased forecast expenditure across various strategic areas such as pupil places, major infrastructure, highways, property, IT, and equipment, alongside new funding allocations including the SEN High Needs Capital Allocation. The report highlighted key projects, budget changes, funding sources, risks, and sustainability implications to support the council's priorities and statutory functions.

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation presented the report.

During discission, members highlighted the following as aspects of the report:-

- extensive investment in school places and SEND provision;
- drainage and highways schemes;
- progress on major transport projects;
- continued commitment to the Watlington Relief Road despite delays;
- the strategic importance of capital investment in supporting county growth.

Councillor Levy moved and Councillor Gregory seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:

Capital Programme

a. **Note the capital monitoring position for 2026/27 set out in this report and summarised in Annex 1.**

b. **Approve the updated Capital Programme at Annex 2 incorporating the changes set out in this report.**

Budget Changes / Budget Release

c. **Note the proposed release of £4.0m from corporate resources agreed by Council in February 2026 for drainage infrastructure improvements (para 69).**

d. **Note the proposed inclusion of Didcot Valley Park SEND school into the capital programme with a development budget of £1.4m (para 70-71).**

Funding Updates

e. **Agree the inclusion in the capital programme of the following grant funding updates and allocations:**

- **Revise of the previous forecasted value of the School Condition Allocation 2026/27 to £4.645m (para 73).**
- **Include the SEN High Needs Capital Allocation 2026/27 of £11.299m to earmarked reserves to address SEN reform requirements (para 74-77).**

f. **Note the current over-programming of the capital programme is £10.365m as agreed by Council in February 2026. The impact on the review of corporate resources and the additional funding available through the DfT Transport consolidated funding settlement will be considered as part of the budget process for 2027/28.**

109/26 GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS FOR OXFORD CASTLE APARTMENTS LIMITED (OCAL)

(Agenda Item. 19)

Cabinet had before it a report which detailed the completion of the acquisition of Oxford Castle Quarter and the planned acquisition of Oxford Castle Apartments Limited (OCAL) as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Council. It outlined the governance arrangements and legal requirements for OCAL, a special purpose vehicle holding residential leasehold interests.

Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, presented the report.

Councillor Levy moved and Councillor Leffman seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:-

a) **Note that the acquisition of the Oxford Castle Quarter site has now completed and that the related acquisition of Oxford Castle Apartments Limited (OCAL) for the nominal consideration of £1 will be concluded, subject to final due diligence, in August 2026**

b) **Agree that the Council will exercise its shareholder function through the Shareholder Committee, consistent with existing arrangements for council-owned companies.**

c) **Delegate authority to the Deputy Chief Executive (S151 Officer), in consultation with the Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer, and the Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, to:**

- **approve the Articles of Association; and**
- **appoint the initial Company Directors,**

with these decisions to be ratified by the Shareholder Committee at its earliest available meeting.

110/26 FORWARD PLAN AND FUTURE BUSINESS

(Agenda Item. 20)

The Cabinet considered a list of items for the immediately forthcoming meetings of the Cabinet together with changes and additions set out in the schedule of addenda.

RESOLVED to note the items currently identified for forthcoming meetings.

111/26 FOR INFORMATION ONLY: CABINET RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY ITEMS

(Agenda Item. 21)

Cabinet noted the following responses to Scrutiny recommendations:-

Minerals and Waste Planning
Protocol for Flag Flying
Road Safety
Unauthorised Waste Disposal Site near Kidlington

112/26 ACQUISITION OF SOLAR FARM IN OXFORDSHIRE

(Agenda Item. 22)

Councillor Bearder moved and Councillor Fawcett seconded the following resolution and it was approved.

RESOLVED: that the public be excluded for the duration of this item since it is likely that if they were present during the item there would be disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) and specified below in relation to this item and since it is considered that, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Cabinet had before it proposals for a potential investment in renewable energy infrastructure, including approval to progress acquisition subject to undertaking further investigation and due diligence.

Councillor Laura Gordon, Cabinet Member for Environment and Economy, introduced the report.

Councillor Gordon moved and Councillor Levy seconded the recommendations and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:

a) **Agree to the acquisition of the solar farm, on the terms set out in exempt Annex 1.**

b) **Delegate authority to the Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment and Economy and the Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation to negotiate and agree the final acquisition terms which will be substantially in accordance with the details set out in exempt Annex 1.**

c) **Delegate authority to the Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer, in consultation with the Director of Property & Assets and the Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer, to conclude negotiations and complete all necessary legal documentation (subject to the completion of all due diligence exercises) to implement the acquisition.**

d) **Note that the outcome of the due diligence and contract terms will be shared with Performance Scrutiny and Cabinet ahead of confirming the contract terms.**

…………………………………………………in the Chair

Date of signing ……………………………………………..