OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL

Audit & Governance Committee
Wednesday, 16 July 2025

ADDENDA

5.   Local Government Reorganisation Progress Update (Pages 1 - 12)

Report by Executive Director of Resources & Section 151 Officer

Please note that the recommendations published in the main agenda have been amended.

The Audit & Governance Committee is RECOMMENDED to:

  a) **To note the Local Government Reorganisation process to date.**
  b) **To note the County Council's preferred option of a single unitary council for Oxfordshire.**
  c) **To note the benefits, areas of development and current assessment against the statutory invitation of the County Council's preferred option.**
  d) **To note the risks and issues created by the disaggregation to key services including those identified by government as 'high risk'.**

7.   Review of Appointments to Outside Bodies (Pages 13 - 26)

Report by Director of Law & Governance & Monitoring Officer

Updated Annex 2 attached.

11.   Health & Safety Annual Report (Pages 27 - 52)

Report by Director of Property & Assets

The Annual H&S Report (attached at Annex 1) is a summary of performance and is part of the corporate governance framework. It seeks to provide the Audit and Governance Committee with assurance that arrangements for managing health safety are suitable and sufficient whilst identifying areas for improvement.

This annual report contains information about the work of the Health and Safety (H&S) functions, the council's health and safety performance over the year and its plans for the coming year.

The Audit & Governance Committee is RECOMMENDED to note and accept the contents of the Health and Safety (H&S) Annual Report and the work of the H&S Team to support services and improve performance keeping employees and customers safe.

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
16 JULY 2025

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION PROGRESS UPDATE

**Report of the Executive Director of Resources and Section 151
Officer**

RECOMMENDATION

The Audit & Governance Committee is RECOMMENDED to:

a) **To note the Local Government Reorganisation process to date.**
b) **To note the County Council's preferred option of a single unitary council for Oxfordshire.**
c) **To note the benefits, areas of development and current assessment against the statutory invitation of the County Council's preferred option.**
d) **To note the risks and issues created by the disaggregation to key services including those identified by government as 'high risk'.**

Executive Summary

1. On 16 December 2024, the Government published the Devolution White Paper. The paper sets out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972.

2. Since then, Oxfordshire County Council has been engaged in responding to the statutory invitation, having received feedback from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), to prepare a proposal for local government reorganisation. This report sets out the activity of the County Council so far and a high-level assessment of the County Council's position against the statutory invitation (**Annex 1**).

Background

Local Government Reorganisation Proposals

3. Since the receipt of the statutory invitation, all councils across Oxfordshire have been working together on initial options accompanied by a single interim plan. This plan for Oxfordshire's proposals was submitted to Government on 21 March 2025.

The plan set out **three** proposals:

- A single unitary council for Oxfordshire (comprising the County Council and all five district councils in Oxfordshire), the County Council's preferred option.

- Two unitary councils – Oxford and Shires Council (comprising Oxford City, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils) and Ridgeway Council (comprising South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council).

- Three unitary councils – Greater Oxford Council (covering Oxford and its Green Belt) ; Northern Oxfordshire Council (covering most of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire districts) ; Ridgeway Council (covering most of the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts combined with existing West Berkshire unitary based on the proposals being developed by those councils, but with those villages within the Green Belt closest to the city becoming part of Greater Oxford)

Internal and External Engagement

4. Since June 2025, there has been internal engagement on Local Government Reorganisation and the single unitary council for Oxfordshire proposal including with senior managers, colleague inclusion networks and values champions. This depth of engagement has also extended to councillors of the Council with all councillor briefings, Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee (September 2025) and at this Committee.

5. There has also been external engagement on the proposals, which is a requirement from the statutory invitation. The County Council's approach has been the creation of:

- An open online survey, with paper copies available on request and in libraires: [One council: Your Oxfordshire | Let's Talk Oxfordshire].. At the time of drafting the report, there had been just over a thousand responses. This survey is complemented through the council's representative residents' survey, sent to 6,000 households selected by stratified random probability sampling. This is a postal survey, with an option to respond online.

- That method will be amplified by up to 18 on-street interview shifts at various county locations to target 18–44-year-olds who are traditionally less likely to respond to speculative surveys.

- Nine residents' focus groups exploring both strategic plan and Local Government Reorganisation with residents segmented by various demographics but largely based on life stage and type of geography including 3x groups in areas of higher deprivation.

- Three or four in-secondary school focus groups exploring both strategic plan and Local Government Reorganisation, with a citizenship element where students learn about how democracy works in Oxfordshire/nationally involving co-presentations/Q&A with the Chair/Deputy Chair of the council for the citizenship element only.

Local Government Reorganisation Criteria and Timescales

6. The Government has set out its intention to significantly reform, at great pace, local government structures and implement devolution across England.

7. The Government wishes to see successor councils emerge from the current two-tier system of district and county councils and that those successor councils and the existing unitary[1]-structured councils of England must join a Strategic Authority.

8. The Government has stopped short of instructing places on how to reorganise local government, and arrive at successor councils, but instead has been clear that areas must work together on a proposal/s for the benefit of residents.

9. The Government has set out guidance within the statutory invitation to support local government reorganisation. That guidance includes:

    (a) Size/council footprint to achieve efficiency saving – new Councils as a guiding principle must be a minimum of 500,000 with exceptions on a case by cases basis;
    (b) Deliver high quality and sustainable services;
    (c) Enable devolution to a Strategic Authority;
    (d) Empower neighbourhoods and;
    (e) Be informed by a level of engagement.

10. The Government has requested that Councils commence work to reorganise in two phases. The first phase was to share outline proposals to Government by 21 March 2025. Feedback was received on all three proposals and are working through that feedback. The second phase is to commence the development of final business proposals, and the Government expects all Councils to respond by no later than 28 November 2025.

11. The Government has not suggested that the features of the guidance, evidenced in paragraph 9 above are weighted in any way, to prioritise one over the other. Therefore, the ultimate decision will be the Secretary of State's after the submission on 28 November 2025 based on the relative merits of each proposal and matters arising from the statutory consultation which the Secretary of State, via their department, will launch, manage and may report the findings of.

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[1] A unitary council is one which delivers all the functions of local government eg. Social care services, planning and licensing, libraries, housing, environmental health, waste collection and disposal etc.

12. Timescales are not yet known for any statutory consultation post submission of the business case in November 2025, but the Government has confirmed that a new Council or Councils will go live in May 2028 with shadow elections to a Council or Councils in May 2027.

Single Unitary Council Option

13. A single unitary council would create a single front door for all local authority services across the historic and recognised County of Oxfordshire, delivering high quality, value-for-money, resilient and responsive services to residents, visitors, businesses, institutions and investors.

14. This proposal has been developed in clear alignment with the Government's White Paper and disaggregation of all high-risk people and public safety services avoided.

15. It has been independently verified that this new council would save the taxpayer an estimated £27m annually and that the payback period, taking into consideration one off costs to transition, would be less than twelve months. Taking a five-year view for illustrative purposes, this would create savings of up to £109m for our residents.

16. A single Oxfordshire unitary will be an important anchor institution for the establishment and sound operation of a strategic authority with our partners in Berkshire and for the Oxford to Cambridge Corridor and Oxford Growth Commission.

17. The devolution white paper was clear that Government wishes to 'complete the map' and ensure that all parts of England are covered by a Strategic Authority. Maximum powers, funding and influence across the functions of strategic transport, housing and strategic planning will go to those Strategic Authorities with a Mayor.

18. The government is seeking a strategic authority to operate at a much greater scale to local government and should cover a resident population of approx. 1.5 million residents.

19. The County Council, in concert with its district council partners, are working with all Berkshire Councils to bring forward a devolution agreement and commence the necessary work and, in time, decisions in which to establish a strategic authority. This aligns with the County Council's response s to the white paper and our statutory invitation to local government reform.

Benefits of a Single Unitary Council

Closer to Communities

20. A brand-new council provides the opportunity to fundamentally revisit delivery, decision making and democracy at different spatial levels to ensure efficacy and equity using, as a starting point, fifty years' experience of delivering services across Oxfordshire.

21. The County Council has commissioned a piece of work from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to look at locality working and neighbourhood governance and ensure this new democratic structure works at a range of different spatial levels. District Council colleagues and councillors, as well as a range of partners have contributed to this work.

22. The new council has an opportunity to enhance the role of Town and Parish Councils, and the County Council is working with Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC) to consider this in the single unitary council proposal.

Connected

23. A single unitary council option provides a single front door which creates ease of access for residents, businesses and investors to the full suite of council services.

24. It allows Oxfordshire to remain as a distinct and functional county area – highly connected through travel to work, housing markets and home to school transport. Furthermore, stakeholders, including early insight from the public, are feeding back that they wish to keep this county together.

25. It creates opportunities to cluster, on a functional basis, connected services e.g. housing, transport, planning, economic development and energy, alongside, public health, wellbeing and leisure, parks and open spaces, libraries as well as fire and rescue, trading standards, environmental health, anti-social behaviour, community engagement. Enabling these functions and the public sector reform available to be unlocked at scale.

26. This option allows a single clear voice for the county to be heard locally, regionally and nationally.

Cost Effective

27. A single unitary council will have fewer councillors, fewer senior managers, fewer systems and fewer, better utilised, buildings.

28. It would enable maximum levels of workforce consolidation, which is under great strain, especially in the South East. A single council could maximise available resources for all types of service delivery including front line service delivery.

Financial Modelling

29. PwC UK provided each individual two-tier county council with a high-level analysis across the different scenarios based on the national modelling approach to inform their local discussions with partners.
PwC considered the following costs and benefits:

- Benefits of aggregation: Weightings applied to three types of spend, with percentage reductions then applied. Democracy benefits use the number of districts multiplied by an average cost.

- Transition costs: Fixed costs and proportional redundancy costs incurred (excluding disaggregation). These are the one-off costs of reorganisation.

- Cost of disaggregation: Recurring costs of splitting countywide services into multiple unitaries. This would also include the reduction in benefit from reorganisation to multiple unitaries, as opposed to a single unitary option.

	Single Unitary
Total annual benefit (£m)	27,011,103
One-off transition costs (£m)	-19,232,468
Annual disaggregation cost (£m)	N/A
One-year impact of disaggregation (£m)	N/A
Fire-year impact of disaggregation (£m)	N/A
Net benefit after five years (£m)	109,070,273
Recurring benefit after five years (£m)	27,011,103
Payback period	Less than one year

Consolidation and Disaggregation

30. In any scenario of local government reform, there will be a significant amount of change required to support a transition to new arrangements. Consolidation of existing services and their workforce, estate, processes, systems and cultures will all need to be effectively led and managed into a new authority or authorities so they can commence their 'vesting day'2 in a safe, legal and confident form.

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[2] Vesting Day is the name given to the first day a new authority 'goes live'.

31. The statutory invitation requests the avoidance of disaggregating 'high risk' services such as adults, children's, SEND and homelessness and public safety. As the upper tier authority and with the responsibility for the majority of those services, disaggregation would need to take place to varying degrees to create successor councils depending on the proposal taken forward.

32. All of the County Council's services are planned on a county-wide footprint and therefore not necessarily distributed evenly across new areas, for example in-house children's residential homes plus other providers the council commissions. In addition, the council has a highly integrated set of budgetary and commissioning arrangements with NHS commissioners, the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board.

33. In advance of any submission, significant conversations will be needed with district colleagues on the model of disaggregation which was to follow in the event that a two council or a three council option was selected by the Secretary of State. It would be reasonable for NHS commissioners, the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board, to have oversight / involvement in those conversations given our shared and highly embedded commissioning arrangements and pooled budgets which total £0.5bn.

34. There may be costs of duplicating single statutory posts/systems that will have to exist under each new unitary authority. For example, senior managers within Children's Services who hold various statutory functions. These include the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), Safeguarding Children Partnership lead and principal social worker. Such workforce challenges also extend to specialist roles that prove difficult to recruit to in adult services, such as Mental Capacity Act/Deprivation of Liberty Safeguarding professionals, safeguarding specialists and brokerage officers in adult services.

35. This also extends to the additional servicing costs associated with multiple authorities with social care responsibilities attending and participating in Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service, virtual school, schools' forum, Youth Offending service, adoption and fostering panels.

36. The council has developed a robust and strong local market for social care which balances the cost challenges of delivering care within both a rural and urban environment. There is a risk of market management being fragmented as a result of disaggregation. The council commissions services on an Oxfordshire wide basis with providers being able to flex resources without location being an issue.

37. There are a number of specific Public Health initiatives where effectiveness is directly related to scale, for example the impact of becoming a Marmot County with focus that is county wide to maximise impact.

38. Outside of the Council's 'people and care' related functions, some form of disaggregation would still have to take place.

39. The Council is the lead local flood authority which in principle is straight forward to disaggregate but in practice, many of our borders (principally parish boundaries) run along water courses that, if disaggregated, will have more authorities responsible either side of streams and rivers.

40. The County Council is also the minerals and waste planning authority. The Minerals and Waste Plan is set out on an Oxfordshire wide basis. Cooperating across multiple areas to develop a new plan will create additional levels of avoidable activity. In the meantime, taking decisions on the legacy plan would likely require some form of joint committee.

41. The County Council delivers specialist services with a small and in some cases, very small, workforce making it challenging to disaggregate. Examples include the coroners service, registration (births, marriages, deaths, citizenship), archaeology, trees and our nature/biodiversity and ecology teams. The full extent of disaggregation of any of these services requires additional work alongside district council colleagues.

42. Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue service is one that is hosted by the council – the County Council is the legally determined Fire Authority. As part of the devolution white paper, there is an expectation that fire and rescue service and police and crime commissioner responsibilities will be the responsibility of the Mayor where geographies align.

43. The disaggregation of the existing Fire Authority is highly complicated due to the number of unknowns and lack of control that the County Council has over decisions which affect it. Those decisions being the eventual form of local government across Oxfordshire, the local agreement to create a Strategic Authority and the Government's endorsement of that and the laying and passing of legislation to allow that organisation to come into effect. It would be highly advantageous to be able to consult the proposed legislation to allow this, the Devolution Bill, which is yet to be laid in parliament. As part of future discussions on a model of disaggregation, the future of the Fire Authority and its services to Oxfordshire is a clear priority.

44. With respect to highways, maintenance inefficiencies could be created when on a smaller scale. This also extends to contractual challenges, potentially requiring several contracts rather than one, an increase in depot requirements and several teams managing these all adding to costs. There are varied risks with road and

bridge conditions across the county, and some successor authorities could be left with considerable liabilities.

45. Strategic transport would become a function of a future Strategic Authority. The functions which would sit at that level include local transport planning, light rail and concessionary fares. Remaining functions would sit with the unitary authority/authorities. Clarity on the full extent of local authority powers over bus franchising as part of the Bus Services Bill will assist in assessing the full extent and model of disaggregation for the Local Transport Authority which is Oxfordshire County Council.

46. Waste disposal could be challenging due to the locations and catchment of some Household Waste Recycling Centres. Contracts in place at Oxfordshire level would either need to remain with all councils signed up to, or contracts would need exiting (with some cost attached) and new contracts entered.

47. Different and conflicting transport policies and infrastructure plans could arise with more than one council across Oxfordshire, with recognition that there would be a need to deal with an increased number of boundaries creating additional activity.

Partnership Working

48. Significant levels of engagement with partnerships are done on an Oxfordshire wide basis and as such, having a county wide institution is an efficient mode of engagement. This is especially relevant for those organisations who are commissioned to undertake services aligned to children's, adults and public health. In a scenario where there are two or three authorities with the statutory functions associated with delivery of those services, those voluntary and community sector organisations may have several organisations commissioning them. Some of the partnerships and Oxfordshire organisations that the County Council currently engages with at a county wide level include, but are not limited to:

- Oxfordshire Community & Voluntary Action (OCVA)
- Oxfordshire Youth
- Oxfordshire Mind
- Age Concern Oxfordshire
- The Oxfordshire Community Foundation
- Communities First Oxfordshire
- Homeless Oxfordshire
- Wild Oxfordshire
- The Oxfordshire Trust for the Environment
- The Oxfordshire Lieutenancy
- Armed Forces
- CPRE Oxfordshire
- Oxfordshire Careers Association
- Oxfordshire Social Enterprise Partnership
- Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership
- Zero Caron Oxfordshire

- Responsible Oxfordshire Business Inclusion Network (ROBIN)
- Oxfordshire Playing Fields Association
- Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils

Next Steps

48. The council will continue to work with staff (including statutory officers), Councillors, district councils and wider stakeholders to understand their views on the County Council's proposal for a single council for Oxfordshire. Using this insight to develop a vision and high-level operating model for a future Oxfordshire Council.

49. The County Council's preferred proposal and accompanying business case will be prepared in line with the published CIPFA financial template and the council will draw on the support of CIPFA to assure the County Council and all district councils that the financial assumptions are consistent and accurate.

50. The submission of a proposal and accompanying business case to Cabinet for decision ahead of the 28 November deadline.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

51. The Council has agreed strategic priorities in which to:

    a) Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
    b) Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network.
    c) Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.
    d) Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire.

52. Progression of reorganisation ambitions will provide a successor Council or Councils with new responsibilities in which to progress social, economic and cultural objectives.

53. Local government reorganisation will require partners to ensure democratic participation and voice is protected and where possible, strengthened as part of this process.

Legal Implications

54. The legal basis for the statutory invitation having been issued is the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

Comments checked by:
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Staff Implications

55. None immediately arising from this report, however considerable resource will be needed to progress the business case submission as outlined in this paper.

56. It is expected that there will need to be separate teams to progress with the implementation of a new council or councils and the wind-down of the County Council and the five district councils in Oxfordshire. This will need to be drawn from governance, communications and engagement, finance, programme management, other professionals and subject matter experts.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

57. None immediately arising from this report.

Sustainability Implications

58. None immediately arising from this report.

Risk Management

59. Service based risks have principally been highlighted as part of this report but further, financial and corporately focussed ones are outlined below and will be considered by Cabinet in due course.

- There will be one off costs for reorganisation.
- Council tax harmonisation will be required.
- Loss of management time engaged in the reorganisation process.
- New Council or Councils will require refreshed decision-making arrangements.
- Contract harmonisation will need to take place to ensure value for money.
- During the implementation period some Councils may take decisions that could impact on the resilience and sustainability of the new Council or Councils.
- Risk of local government funding reform impacting on the sustainability of all Councils.

HELEN MITCHELL
Head of Public Affairs and Strategy

Annex:

- Annex 1- Letter from His Majesty's Government – 5 February 2025

Background papers:

- Devolution White Paper - Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth – December 2024 – English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK

- Restoration and Resilience – South East Employers, published 5 December, 2024 - Restoration and Resilience Report launched to support services across the South East - South East Councils

- Evaluating the Importance of Scale in Proposals for Local Government Reorganisation, County Councils Network – August 2020 - Updated financial analysis: evaluating the importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation - County Councils Network

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July 2025

GUIDANCE

COUNCILLOR MEMBERSHIP OF OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

Introduction

This general advice is for Councillors and who represent the Council on organisations outside the Council, whether as a company director, the trustee of a charity or a representative on a management committee. It simply sets out some of the most important responsibilities. It is not meant to be a comprehensive guide. If Councillors have any queries, then they must contact the Monitoring Officer for advice.

Councillors are appointed formally by the Council annually to work in partnership with a range of outside bodies, including voluntary organisations, local government associations, charitable organisations and other organisations who undertake or facilitate valuable public and community work.

In performing that role, Councillors can act as individuals, representatives of the Council, directors or trustees.

The role of Councillors on outside bodies may give rise to occasional uncertainty and perhaps to conflicts of interest. This Guidance offers a simple guide on the responsibilities of Councillors. Councillors are asked to read this Guidance and if there are issues arising from their particular situation at any time, to contact the Monitoring Officer for advice.

Councillors are under a specific obligation as a result of the Local Authorities (Companies) Order 1995 ("the Order") to report back to the Council on their involvement in outside companies to which they have been nominated by the Council. In essence, the Order seeks to ensure that when local authorities engage in activities through companies, that there is transparency, accountability and financial oversight.

This Guidance and the Council's Members' Code of Conduct addresses some of the issues around the possibility of conflicts of interest. In essence, if the outside body comes into conflict with the Council and the Councillor is a director or on the management committee of the outside body, it is likely that the Councillor's prime duty would be to the outside body in the conduct of the outside body's affairs. The Councillor is however also given specific dispensation in the Council's Members' Code of Conduct to participate in the Council decision-making process in relation to the outside body to which he or he has been appointed.

General

Membership on outside bodies can take various forms and it would be prudent to establish the capacity in which you are appointed and your roles and responsibilities. The first question is whether you are appointed by the Council, or in some other capacity. If you are not appointed by the Council to a particular position, you do not owe the Council any duties in relation to the way in which you carry on your membership of the outside body. However, the normal rules on declaring interests apply, and you will need to consider

whether your role gives you a disclosable pecuniary interest in relation to any Council business. The remainder of this Guidance covers the case where you are appointed by the Council.

If you are appointed by the Council, this may be either:

a) as a member of a management committee, board of directors, or committee of trustees of the outside body.
Here, you will not only be representing the interests of the Council, but you will also have duties to the outside body and a role in its governance. If you serve in a decision-making capacity or have a position of general control or management on the outside body, whether company, trust or other association, you owe duties and responsibilities to that body which are separate and distinct from your duties owed to the Council. On occasion, it is likely that duties owed to the outside body and to the Council, will conflict e.g. If you are the treasurer of an outside body who has applied to the council for grant funding and the rest of this Guidance gives more detail on this; or

b) As an 'observer', or an ordinary member, or undertaking a monitoring role, facilitating exchanges of views or information as an extension of your council duties, but taking no part in the outside body's management or governance, other than to attend and vote at annual or general meetings. Here, you will be mainly concerned with representing the Council and will not have responsibilities for governance of the body.

What sort of roles does this Guidance apply to?

This Guidance applies where you are:

a) a director of a company in which the Council has an interest;
b) a member of another authority;
c) a trustee of a charity; or
d) a member of the management board for an unincorporated body.

The various roles will give you responsibilities to the organisation, and to the Council in so far as you are fulfilling a role for the Council, and this creates potential conflicts.

Your responsibilities will depend on the type of body in which you become involved. The main types are as follows:

a) **Companies:** Companies are separate legal entities. They are set up by their members, who may be either shareholders or guarantors. Liability of company members is limited to the value of their shares or by guarantee. Directors of companies have a duty to the company to act properly and in good faith. If not, they can incur personal liability, particularly if the company becomes insolvent. The activities and operation of companies are regulated by their Memorandum and Articles of Association, and also by company law.

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b) **Unincorporated Associations:** Unincorporated associations are informal organisations. The members regulate their relationship by agreement, such as a membership agreement or the rules of the club or association. Because the association has no legal existence separate from its members, the liability of the members is not limited. Each member can incur personal responsibility for liabilities incurred on behalf of the association and relies on the membership agreement to be able to recover their costs from the other members.

c) **Charities:** A charity is an organisation which

(i) is established for charitable purposes only, and
(ii) falls to be subject to the control of the High Court in the exercise of its jurisdiction with respect to charities.

Some companies and unincorporated associations are established for charitable purposes. A charity gains relief from corporation tax, VAT and business rates, but is subject to stricter regulation by the Charity Commissioners, to ensure that it is properly managed and that it is spending its money properly on the charitable objects. As a trustee of a charity, you have a duty to act in the best interests of the charity and can be personally liable if you breach that duty.

Points to Consider

Firstly, make sure you are given a clear statement of what is expected of you if you are going to be nominated. The Council should be able to obtain this from the organisation involved.

a) ***The duty to act in the interests of the outside body*** - Being on an outside body can bring many benefits to the Council, the organisation and the community, but it will sometimes create conflicts with your work as a Councillor. For Councillors, it will have to be included as one of your interests in the Members' Register of Interests. You will have a personal interest in Council business referring to it, and sometimes a disclosable pecuniary interest where finances or regulatory matters are concerned. You will need to be sure that involvement with the organisation will not prevent you from fully participating in your work as a Councillor, particularly in areas that interest you, or, where you need to represent the community who elected you. This will depend on the nature of the body and type of involvement.

On the other hand, you will also need to make sure that you are able to commit enough time and attention to the organisation. You will want to make a meaningful contribution to their work too. If you cannot attend meetings very often, or are often conflicted out of participating, you will not be able to give the support that the organisation needs, and this will reflect badly upon the Council and upon you. It is best not to be appointed if you cannot participate fully.

b) ***Conflict with your role as a councillor*** - As a member of the organisation's management committee, as a director of a company, or as a trustee, you will not only be representing the interests of the Council, but you will also owe duties and responsibilities towards the organisation. You will have to exercise your own best judgement in the best interests of the outside body, and you cannot just take instructions from the Council although you may take account of the Council's wishes. Where the Council's wishes may conflict with the best interests of the outside body you must nevertheless, if taking decisions for that outside body, act in its best interests. Therefore, where the Council's interests and the outside body's interests conflict it is better not to involve yourself in the decision-making process.

b) ***Indemnities*** - Councillors who participate in external bodies may be indemnified in relation to liabilities they incur in that capacity, though this is subject to certain limitations, which are set out in more detail below.

Duties and Responsibilities of Councillors on Outside Bodies

The following is a summary of the main duties and responsibilities of Councillors who are nominated by the Council to the most common types of outside body. The main principles of the obligations applying to company directors also apply to trustees and members of management committees. If you are in doubt about your duties and responsibilities, you may seek advice from the Monitoring Officer. In many cases, however, it will be more appropriate to seek advice from the advisers to the body involved, as they will have access to the rules and protocols of the body.

Companies

A company is a separate legal entity which can hold property in its own right, enter into contracts, employ staff and sue and be sued in its own name. The company is distinct from its members, who may be either shareholders or guarantors. The Council itself may be a member of the company, either a shareholder or guarantor.

If the body is a limited company, and you are asked to be involved, it is likely that you will be appointed as a company director. The duties of a company director are set out in the Companies Act 2006, which codifies the existing common law and equitable principles. The management of a company is usually the responsibility of the Board of Directors. Directors' powers are usually set out in the company's Articles of Association. Another important document is the Memorandum of Association, which sets out the Company's objectives and powers.

The duties of a company director are not the same as your responsibilities as a Councillor. Basically, when involved in company business, the company must come first. Directors must act in the interests of the company, and not in the interests of other parties, including shareholders.

Directors' Responsibilities:

a) To promote the success of the company, A director's primary duty is to act in good faith, in the best interests of the organisation and its objects. All directors owe a fiduciary duty to their company, which means they owe loyalty to the company and a duty of care to act in the best interests of the company, having regard to the interests of the members or shareholders of the company, the company's employees, and creditors. This includes having regard to the likely long-term consequences of decisions, the interests of employees, fostering relationships with suppliers and customers and others, the impact of operations on the community and environment, maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct, and acting fairly between members of the company

b) To exercise care, diligence and skill, using your own knowledge, skill and experience, together with the care, skill and diligence which may reasonably be expected of a person who is carrying out the functions of a director. So, a director with significant experience must exercise the appropriate level of diligence in exercising their duties in line with their higher level of expertise. Although directors are not bound to attend all meetings of directors, attendance should be as frequent as possible, and directors should ensure that they are reasonably informed at all times.

c) Not to exceed powers. A company director must act in accordance with the company's constitution, and exercise powers for the purposes for which they were given.

d) To comply with the Companies Act in relation to the keeping of accounts and ensure that the relevant returns are made to the Registrar of Companies. Failure to do so will incur fines and persistent default can lead to disqualification as a director.

e) To avoid conflicts of interest. A director must avoid a situation in which they have, or may have, a direct or indirect interest which conflicts, or could conflict, with the interests of the company. This duty applies particularly to transactions between a director and a third party in relation to the exploitation of any property, information or opportunity.

f) To exercise independent judgement. A director nominated by the Council cannot, for example, simply vote in accordance with the Council's instructions. To do so would be a breach of duty. The director must act in the company's interests.

g) Not to accept benefits from third parties. A company director must not accept any benefit from a third party (whether monetary or otherwise) which has been conferred because of the fact that they are a director. This is based on the established principle that a director must not make a secret profit as a result of being a director. This duty applies unless the acceptance of the benefit cannot reasonably be regarded as likely to give rise to a conflict of interest.

6

h) To declare an interest in a proposed transaction or arrangement with the company. A company director who has either a direct or an indirect interest in a proposed transaction or arrangement with the company must declare the 'nature and extent' of that interest to the other directors before the company enters into the transaction. Directors' Liabilities: If a director fails to carry out his/her duties, action can be brought for breach of duty, either by the company itself, or by a liquidator if the company goes into liquidation, or with the consent of the court, by a shareholder. Such actions are unlikely where the company is properly controlled by the directors.

Some important considerations:

a) It is not always easy to reconcile the various factors which must be taken into account when reaching a major decision. The important thing as a director is to show that you are aware of and have taken account of the relevant factors and have exercised due care and diligence in giving them all fair consideration.

b) It may be difficult to be certain whether benefits may be regarded as giving rise to a conflict of interest. If you are unsure take advice from the company's advisers.

c) Make sure you are aware of the company's constitution; it's Memorandum and Articles of Association, so that you know what it can and cannot do. You must take this into account when making decisions, as well as any shareholder decisions that are relevant.

d) Be diligent, and make sure you are well informed about the company's affairs. Make sure you are well briefed when taking up the role, and that you receive regular briefings throughout your term of office.

e) Attend training and briefing sessions.

f) Ensure insurance is in place.

g) Some Board decisions may be reviewed on a future occasion. Make sure detailed minutes show that all necessary factors have been considered when major decisions are being taken. Obtain expert advice where necessary e.g. regarding impact of a decision on the environment. Take legal advice where there are doubts about a director's duty in relation to a particular matter.

Local Authority Controlled and Influenced Companies:

There are special rules that affect companies in which councils have major interests. These are 'regulated' companies for the purposes of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. They are in effect controlled by (more than 50% interest) or subject to a council's influence (20% interest plus business relationship) because of its level of interest, either individually, or with a group of other authorities. They will generally be subject to the local

government capital finance regime and special propriety controls. However, so far as Councillors who are involved are concerned, there are some additional requirements that need to be complied with as follows:

a) Remuneration if any, that Councillors receive from the company should not exceed that received from a local authority for a similar role, and it should be declared.

b) To provide information to Councillors about their activities as required by the local authority (unless it is confidential); and

c) To cease to be a director immediately if disqualified as a Councillor.

Unincorporated Associations

"Unincorporated associations" have no separate identity from their members. The rules governing the members' duties and liability will be set out in a constitution, which is simply an agreement between the members as to how the organisation will operate. Usually, the constitution will provide for a management committee to be responsible for the everyday running of the organisation. Management Committee members must act within the constitution and must take reasonable care in exercising their powers. An unincorporated organisation may be charitable and may register as a charity.

If you are involved in a decision-making capacity or have a position of general control or management on an unincorporated body, as the body has no separate corporate status, any liabilities will fall upon you personally. Councillors appointed to such bodies should familiarise themselves with the Constitution to understand the nature of their role, responsibilities and liabilities, and should assess the risk of personal liability, and the extent to which it has been covered by insurance.

Charities:

A charity is an organisation which operates for the public benefit and exclusively charitable purposes, either:

❖   the relief of poverty and human suffering

❖   the advancement of education

❖   the advancement of religion

❖   another purpose for the benefit of the community.

A number of useful publications are available on the Charity Commission's website at www.charitycommission.gov.uk. *'The Essential Trustee- What you Need to Know'* is a useful guide:

The essential trustee: what you need to know, what you need to do - GOV.UK.

Those who are responsible for the control and administration of a charity are referred to as its *trustees*, even where the organisation is a company limited by guarantee and even though they are not strictly trustees. A charity may also be unincorporated. Trustees of a charity retain personal liability and can only delegate to the extent that the constitution authorises them so to do.

Charitable Trustees' Responsibilities

a) To act in accordance with the charity's trust deed or governing document.

b) To protect the charity's assets.

c) To comply with the Charities Acts, and the Trustee Act 2000.

d) Trustees must not make a private profit from their position. They cannot receive remuneration without the sanction of the Charity Commission.

e) To perform their duty with the standard of care which an ordinary, prudent business person would show. Higher standards are required of professionals, and in relation to investment matters.

d) Charitable trustees must ensure that the information relating to the charity and trustees is registered with the Charity Commissioners and that annual accounts, reports and returns are completed and sent.

d) Trustees are under a duty to ensure compliance with all relevant legislation (e.g. in relation to tax and land matters).

Charitable Trustees' Liabilities:

Generally, a trustee may incur personal liability if they: -

- act outside the scope of the trust deed

- fall below the required standard of care

- act otherwise than in the best interests of the charity, in a way which causes loss to the charity fund

- make a personal profit from the trust assets

In such circumstances the trustee will be in breach of trust and will incur personal liability for losses incurred. If in doubt, always consult the Charity Commissioners. You may avoid personal liability for breach of trust if you act in accordance with their advice.

Trustees can incur personal liabilities for contracts they enter into in the name of the charity. They will normally be entitled to be reimbursed from charitable funds for liabilities and expenses properly incurred by them. If the charity is a

company, the trustees will be protected from liabilities incurred in the day-to-day running of the charity in the normal course of events but will as stated above be personally liable if they commit a breach of trust.

Partnerships:

Within the public sector, bodies are formed which can be described as partnerships. These can involve local authorities with other public sector bodies or sections of other public sector bodies in dealing with specific issues. A partnership may be:

a) an informal group where each organisation's representative comes to the group with a defined purpose/supply of resources from their organisation to contribute to a particular programme of events. Councillors sitting on a partnership steering group or committee should act within the scope of the authority given to them by the Council.

b) where more formal arrangements are made and a legal agreement is entered into between all the parties as to what the object of the partnership is and what the obligations/inputs will be from the partners. Councillors should familiarise themselves with the legal agreement and the rights and obligations of the partners set out in it.

Indemnities

Councillors who participate in external bodies may be indemnified in relation to liabilities they incur in that capacity, though this is subject to certain limitations.

Indemnity by the outside body:

a) <u>Directors</u>: Directors cannot be indemnified by the company against liability for negligence, default, breach of duty and trust. Companies can however purchase insurance to protect directors against claims of negligence, default, breach of duty and trust. Those appointed as directors should ensure that appropriate insurance is in place. Companies can, if their Articles of Association allow, provide for directors to be indemnified for the costs of defending such a claim if they are granted relief by the court or acquitted.

b) <u>Trustees</u>: Provided a charitable trustee acts properly, and within their powers, indemnity can be given from the trust fund. Trustees can take out insurance to protect themselves from personal liabilities, but not for criminal acts such as fraud. If the premiums are to be paid out of the charitable funds, the consent of the Charity Commissioners will be needed.

c) <u>Unincorporated Associations</u>: Councillors may be entitled to an indemnity if they act in accordance with the Constitution of the association and are not at fault. However, regard must be had to the terms of the constitution. The

constitution will determine whether insurance can be paid for by the organisation.

Indemnity by the Council:

The Council may provide an indemnity where Councillors are acting on an outside body at the request of the Council and provided:

a) the appointment was made by the Council, or

b) the nomination was made by the Council, and

c) the appointment was specifically approved for the purpose of the indemnity.

The indemnity the Council can provide is subject to limitations. In general terms, if a Councillor is acting properly, within their powers and in good faith, the power to indemnify will usually apply. However, the Council cannot, for example, provide an indemnity in relation to any action or failure by any Councillor which constitutes a criminal offence, or for any action or failure by any Councillor which is the result of fraud, or other deliberate wrongdoing or recklessness on the part of the Councillor. When you are serving on an outside body, the Council's indemnity will only apply after any indemnity or insurance from the body itself. There are further limitations, and it is advisable to be clear about the scope of the Council indemnity that may be available to you. You can seek further advice on indemnity from the Monitoring Officer.

Application of the Members' Code of Conduct – Interests:

All Councillors are subject to the Members' Code of Conduct including the Nolan Principles (Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership):

Members' Code of Conduct

You will find a copy of the full Members' Code of Conduct in the Constitution at Part 9.1:

Council Constitution | Oxfordshire County Council

When Councillors act as representatives of the Council on another local authority, they must comply with the other local authority's Code of Conduct. However, when Councillors act as the Council's representative on any other sort of outside body, they must comply with the Council's Members' Code of Conduct unless it conflicts with the lawful obligations of the other body.

Section 30 of the Localism Act 2011 requires Councillors to tell the Monitoring Officer in writing within 28 days of taking office, or within 28 days of any change to your Register of Interests, of any interests which fall within the categories set out in the Members' Code of Conduct (Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) and Other Registrable Interests (ORIs). These categories include your membership or position of control or management in any other bodies to which you are appointed or nominated by the Council.

This means that if you are present at a meeting when an item of business arises which relates to or affects an outside body to which you have been appointed, you <u>must</u> declare that you have a registrable interest, and the nature of that interest, before the matter is discussed or as soon as it becomes apparent to you.

An exemption may apply where your interest arises solely from your membership of, or position of control or management on:

a) any other body to which you were appointed or nominated by the authority

b) any other body exercising functions of a public nature (for example another local authority).

In these exceptional cases, provided that you do not have a disclosable pecuniary interest, you only need to declare your interest if and when you speak on the matter. You will also have another registrable interest in Council business affecting the outside body if:

a) the matter being considered affects the financial position of the outside body; or

b) relates to an approval, consent, licence, permission or registration affecting the outside body e.g. an application for planning permission.

If you have another registrable interest in a matter under discussion you must declare it. You must then leave the meeting room, unless members of the public are allowed to make representations, answer questions or give evidence about the matter. If that is the case, you can make your representations but must leave the room immediately after doing so. You may not remain in the room or any gallery to observe the vote on the matter.

Bias:

Where you might be inclined to the view that you have no registrable interest (pecuniary or otherwise), your duties as a director, or trustee, or member of a management committee may well be regarded, on an objective appraisal, as giving rise to a legitimate fear of lack of impartiality, especially having regard to the desirability of maintaining public confidence. Participation in the decision making at a Council committee meeting by a Councillor who is biased potentially invalidates the decision.

Where membership of the outside body is on an advisory or consultative basis, bias will not be assumed from mere membership. However, once the outside body has a line which is being advocated by you, this could potentially be viewed as bias, and the Council's decision on the issue could be vulnerable to challenge if you participate in those circumstances. It will depend on the facts, and in such circumstances, advice should be sought from the Monitoring Officer.

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AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
16 JULY 2025

HEALTH & SAFETY ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25

Report by Director of Property & Assets

RECOMMENDATION

The Audit & Governance Committee is RECOMMENDED to note and accept the contents of the Health and Safety (H&S) Annual Report and the work of the H&S Team to support services and improve performance keeping employees and customers safe.

Executive Summary

1. The Annual H&S Report (attached at Annex 1) is a summary of performance and is part of the corporate governance framework. It seeks to provide the Audit and Governance Committee with assurance that arrangements for managing health safety are suitable and sufficient whilst identifying areas for improvement.

2. This annual report contains information about the work of the Health and Safety (H&S) functions, the council's health and safety performance over the year and its plans for the coming year.

Background

3. This report is submitted on behalf of the Health and Safety Assurance Board (HSAB) as part of the Council's Corporate Governance Assurance Framework.

4. It is a statutory requirement of all employers to establish occupational health and safety management arrangements so that harm is either eliminated or reduced to an acceptable level. The Council has adopted best practice guidance published by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to ensure that an effective health and safety management system is in place and that the duty of care objective is met.

Key Issues

5. Throughout 2024/25 the H&S Team have focused on reviewing and improving internal health and safety structures to ensure an efficient service targeted on real and significant risk.

6. In line with our policy and action plan we aim to build a safety culture that relates to the councils' values and following principles of:
   - Leadership commitment
   - Employee involvement
   - Open communication
   - Continuous learning
   - Pro-active approach

7. Ensuring health and safety is fundamentally about protecting people from harm and preventing occupational ill-health. The H&S Team have worked collaboratively with services and departments to ensure compliance and promote best practice in the following areas:
    - Reducing work-related musculoskeletal disorders.
    - Protecting against harm from noise and vibration.
    - Learning from serious accidents such as finger entrapment.
    - Promoting safe off-site and adventure activities in schools.
    - Maintaining a safe and compliant estate.

8. As key indicator of effectiveness the total number of accident and incident reports has decreased for the second year running by 13%. It is worth noting that near-miss reporting has significantly increased which is a positive indicator and enables preventative action to be taken.

9. The council was served with a notice of contravention by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in relation to a finger entrapment accident at a maintained primary school. Working with the HSE the H&S Team have worked with the school to take necessary corrective measures to prevent similar incidents happening elsewhere and as a result the case has been closed with no further action.

Financial implications

10. There are no financial implications associated with this report. Checked by Drew Hodgson, Strategic Finance Business Partner.

Legal implications

11. There are several legal obligations that arise from the council's approach to health and safety. As noted below in relation to risk management, this has the potential to give rise to legal liability The council's approach is appropriately captured in the annual report (for example, regarding the appointment of competent persons to assist with health and safety legal duties and the reporting of RIDDOR incidents). There are no further legal implications that arise from this report. Checked by Stephen Woodman, Solicitor.

Equalities implications

12. Health, safety, well-being, and equality, when proactively addressed, are all matters which improve the working environment for our employees and ensure that the council remains an attractive, safe and equitable place to work. In turn, this will support the efficient delivery of services to the people of Oxfordshire.

Sustainability implications

13. There is no sustainability implications associated with this report.

14. The Council must ensure have robust systems of internal control, covering health and safety. By reporting on health and safety performance the Senior Leadership Team can be provided with assurance that the following risks are being managed:

    Reduce Injuries: Accidents and incidents can lead to persons suffering harm. This can lead to increased sickness absence, resourcing pressure, loss of motivation.
    Legal Compliance: Failure to comply with the legal obligations of health and safety can result in liability for prosecution by regulators, such as the HSE. In the most serious cases this has potential to include unlimited fines and prison sentences.
    Reduce Claims: Accidents and incidents can lead to more claims which in turn can affect premiums and excess payments.
    Reputational: Any adverse health and safety incident or prosecution can result in negative reputational impact.

Communications

15. The annual report will be published internally and externally and presented to Audit and Governance Committee.

Report by:　　　　　　　Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property & Assets

Annex:　　　　　　　　　The Annual H&S Report 2024-25

Background papers:　　 None

Contact Officer:　　　　 Paul Lundy, County H&S Manager
　　　　　　　　　　　　　 Paul.lundy@oxfordshire.gov.uk

July 2025

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Health & Safety

Annual Report 2024/25

Contents

Introduction

Oxfordshire County Council values its employees, service users, pupils and others affected by its operations and is committed to protecting their health, safety and wellbeing. It therefore continues to develop and improve its arrangements for managing health and safety.

This annual report contains information about the work of the Health and Safety Team and functions, the council's health and safety performance over the year and its plans for the coming year.

The Health and Safety Team provides advisory and support services across all the council's services with integrated specialists in high-risk areas.

Creating our safety culture

The [health and safety policy](#) establishes the council's corporate approach to health and safety matters with the latest version approved in 2024.

The policy comprises:

Part 1: Policy statement – sets out the organisation's aims and objectives.

Part 2: Roles and responsibilities – outlines who has specific responsibility for managing health and safety and what they are responsible for.

Part 3: Arrangements – details how risks are managed and will reference risk assessments, procedures, training, consultation and emergency arrangements.

By implementing the health and policy we want to create a safety culture that relates to the council's values and behaviours that will determine our commitment to health and safety management.

Leadership Commitment – Leaders set the tone by actively prioritising and investing in workplace safety.

Employee Involvement – Workers at all levels take ownership of safety and feel responsible for their well-being and that of their colleagues.

Open Communication – Employees feel comfortable reporting hazards, incidents, or safety concerns.

Continuous Learning – Safety training, incident investigations, and lessons learned are integrated into daily operations.

Proactive Approach – The organization actively identifies and mitigates risks before they lead to accidents.

Transforming health and safety support

'The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 mandates under Regulation 7 that every employer must appoint competent persons to assist them in complying with health and safety legal duties.'

Through organisational redesign, health and safety functions have been consolidated into a single resource reporting to the Head of Property Operations.

This brings together the corporate, schools and property Health and Safety Teams to provide a more efficient and resilient service.

A wider service review will be carried out during 2025 to ensure we have a robust structure with effective processes that enable:

- Simplification and consolidation of policies, procedures, systems etc. avoiding duplication.

- Improved team resilience and offering career pathways and personal development opportunities.

- Clear strategic oversight and assurance of health and safety across the council.

Workplace health

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) include injuries and conditions that can affect the back, joints and limbs, they are also are a common cause of sickness absence. It is important we look after our health and take steps to prevent or reduce the risk of MSD developing. For workers using display screen equipment (DSE) or manual handling this can increase the risk through poor posture or repetitive work.

To promote better health and wellbeing across our workforce we have delivered face-to-face workshops including:

- **DSE Drop-in clinics.** This practical session offers the opportunity for employees to meet an assessor to discuss any problems and learn how to set up equipment to meet their individual requirements.

- **MSK Screening.** These consist of a 'mini-MOT' to assess someone's endurance, flexibility, strength and balance. Employees will be given advice on whether they might be predisposed to developing an MSD.

The aim of these sessions is to provide employees with practical and straightforward advice that reduces the risk of aches and pains, following the ethos that 'prevention is better than cure'.

Mental health and wellbeing in the Fire Service

Fire service personnel are especially vulnerable to mental health issues due to the high levels of stress and trauma they encounter in the line of duty.

It is essential that all firefighters learn how to recognize their own mental-health status and take steps to address any issues.

Unfortunately, these issues remain highly stigmatized, and it can be difficult for individuals to find the help they need.

In 2024-25 the service has:

- Worked to increase awareness & promoted support available.
- Organised "Real Talk Real People" online sessions on Men's Mental Health and Retirement.
- Managers forums.
- Station Visits to discuss Mental Health.
- 45 Mental Health First Aiders in service.
- Employee Assist Programme (EAP)
- Critical Incident Debriefing (CID) - designed to reduce the effects of stress-related disorders that can occur in personnel who have attended traumatic incidents.
- Firefighters Charity Workshops promoting support available.

Preventing hand-arm vibration syndrome

Hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS) causes changes in the sensation of the fingers which can lead to permanent numbness of fingers, muscle weakness and, in some cases, bouts of white finger. It is caused by repeated and frequent working with hand-held vibrating tools, such as power cutters, grinders, chainsaws and pneumatic drills.

HAVS has recently been a target area of enforcement activity by the Health and Safety executive with several recent prosecutions due to poor management controls. Vibration is a particular risk for Fire and Rescue and Countryside services.

To ensure the council has effective controls in place to protect staff the H&S Team have commissioned specialist testing to measure the vibration of equipment and tools. Testing included rescue and cutting equipment on fire appliances, workshop power tools and countryside maintenance plant.

This work has helped develop a platform for preventing HAVS including:

- Ensuring vibration is considered when purchasing new equipment.

- Increased worker awareness of HAVS and how to protect themselves.

- Implementation of safe systems of work when using equipment to protect workers from the risk of HAVS.

- Prescribed health surveillance and monitoring.

Protection against noise damage

Exposure to high noise levels can cause permanent hearing damage, often without the sufferer being aware of it until it is too late. Noise can be generated by processes and equipment such as powered tools or machinery.
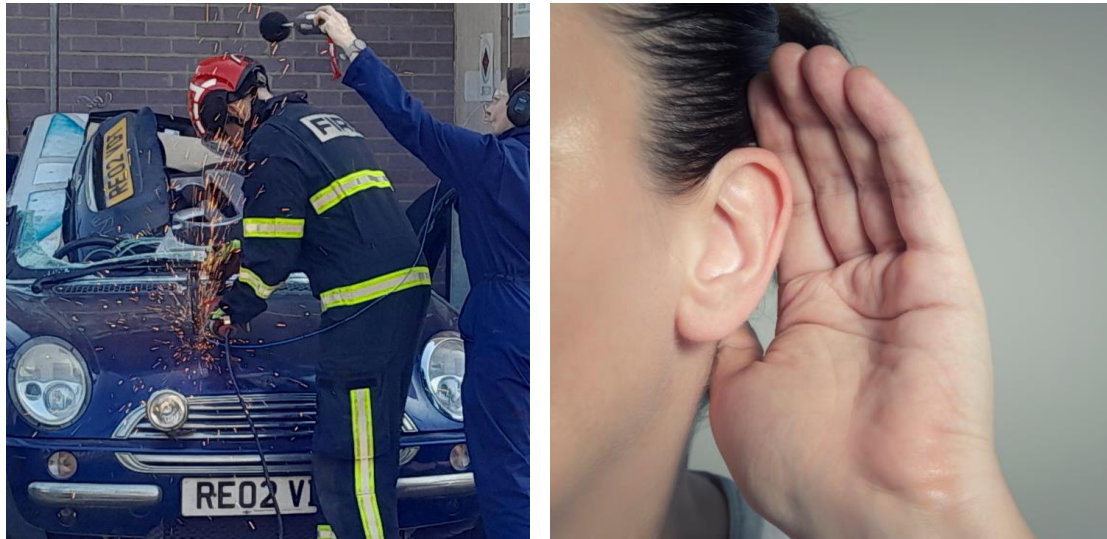
Utilising our inhouse health and safety team we have carried out assessments to measure occupational noise exposure levels.

By identifying hazards, we have worked with services to eliminate or control noise risks including:

- Make sure legal limits on noise exposure are not exceeded.

- Supply and use quieter tools and machinery.

- For higher-risk areas, plan and put in place technical and organisational control measures.

- Specify and provide hearing protection.

- Put in place health surveillance (including hearing checks) for those at risk.

- Provide worker information and training on safe working practices.

Looking after little digits

Most finger trapping incidents involve younger children who do not fully recognise the danger that doors and in particular doorjambs represent. Finger entrapment risk is a particular consideration for schools, nurseries and other settings used by young children such as museums, community centres and playgroups.

In Oxfordshire, a primary school pupil sustained partial amputation of their finger after trapping it in a door. The incident was investigated by the council's Health and Safety Team and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) with the aim of identifying preventative measures to prevent similar accidents occurring elsewhere. These measures included ensuring thorough risk assessments are carried out by responsible premises managers to identify any entrapment risks and putting in place physical controls such as installing finger-guards on all doors presenting a higher risk including areas used by early years and key stage 1 pupils.

As the employer responsible for health and safety in community and voluntary controlled schools, the council will continue to highlight the issue of finger entrapment and seek assurance that risk assessments have been completed, this has been included in the school health and safety monitoring form for the current academic year 24/25 and moving forward.

Adventure, fun and learning

Learning outside the classroom helps to bring the curriculum to life, provides deeper subject learning and increases self-confidence. It also helps children and young people develop their risk awareness and prepares them for their future working lives.

Striking the right balance between protecting children and young people from risk and allowing them to learn from educational visits has been a challenge for many schools.

'Well-managed school trips and outdoor activities are great for children. Children won't learn about risk if they're wrapped in cotton wool.' (HSE)

Following a detailed review the council has re-launched its Educational Visits Service to provide comprehensive, affordable and personalised advice, guidance and training to schools in Oxfordshire.

Key features of this service include:

- Appointment of a highly experienced Educational Visits Officer providing schools with expert advice and scrutiny of visits with enhanced risk.

- Access to a new planning portal to assist in risk assessment, approvals, staff certifications and provider assurances.

- Access to the Visit Emergency Support Network (VESN) – 24-hour critical incident support.

- Range of training for school Educational Visit Co-ordinators and visit leaders.

Safer by design

The concept of "safer by design" refers to integrating safety considerations into the design process to prevent accidents and injuries.

By consulting with building users and learning from lived experiences we aim to inform design principles that enhance safety and accessibility.

The **Speedwell House** project provides the opportunity to deliver a modern building with inclusive design at its core. Creating environments that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or retro-fit. This approach ensures that the building will cater to the diverse needs of everyone, including those with disabilities.

An extensive programme of improvement work has been carried out at **Woodeaton Manor School** to enhance a historical building, so it is inclusive and safe for pupils with SEN. This work has included new security and fencing, fire safety improvements and essential repairs and maintenance.

Recent expansion of **residential accommodation for children in care** has involved designers working with children's services to ensure risks are designed out or reduced. Examples include specification of anti-ligature fittings, anti-vandal doors and fire safety systems designed to reduce risk of misuse.

Property compliance

The council has responsibility for managing and maintaining it's estate to ensure buildings and land are compliant with statutory and regulatory standards. This includes:

- Construction projects (capital and minor works) e.g. new builds, refurbishments, demolition.
- Repairs and maintenance including statutory compliance e.g. fire safety, asbestos, water hygiene, gas, electrical, fixed plant and equipment etc.
- Estates management including health and safety responsibility through leases and licences.

93% statutory compliant across circa 250 sites.

11,000 planned preventative maintenance tasks completed.

Maintaining the council's estate can be challenging and complex. Continuous improvement is key to maintaining legal compliance which has included:

- Self-delivery of fire and security maintenance resulting in financial savings, improved response times, expert oversight where outsourcing tasks may be required and improved compliance with respect to fire safety.

- Development of systems and tools to assist Responsible Premises Managers with day-to-day building management tasks.

- Introduction of 'permit-to work system' to ensure high risk activities (e.g. hot work, working at height etc.) are carried out safely with necessary precautions in place.

Fire and Rescue Service

Peer Audit

In June 2024, the service was subject to a health and safety peer review by several of our health and safety counterparts from across the southeast.

The audit examined the effectiveness of the health and safety management system and performance against specific risk areas.

Improvements and actions from the report are a focus for the team and wider OFRS department heads.


Protecting firefighters from contaminants has been a key risk area for the service including:

- "Clean working principles" implemented on Stations and in Vehicles.
- Zoning in place across service buildings.
- Washroom upgrades
- Six new fire appliances (25 plate) with operational Breathing Apparatus (BA) stored outside of the main cab.
- Installation of mechanical BA washers at strategic locations across the county.
- Provision of personal welfare items to operational employees.

Corporate health and safety training

95% Completion – Introduction to H&S for all employees (Induction eLearning)
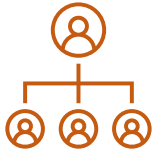
↑76% Completion – H&S for managers

Health and safety is part of our essential learning and development programme.

The H&S for managers training has been refreshed and re-launched for 2025. As a virtual classroom session additional capacity has seen an upward trend in completions.

Role or task specific training e.g. asbestos awareness, moving and handling etc. is organised by services.

Peoplesafe lone working app

954 protected users
↑80% take up of 1186 assigned licences

767 alarms raised, all of which were precautionary, tests or accidental
0 triaged alarms required emergency services escalation

3402 user actions including check-in's

There is a sustained increase in the use of the lone worker mobile application 'Peoplesafe'. The H&S Team continue to promote its use and run regular user workshops and provide face to face support. The app is assigned on a priority basis to those undertaking higher risk lone working such as social workers.

Audits and inspections

Corporate

Corporate health and safety audits were carried out in the following service areas:

- Children's homes and residential services
- Children and family centres
- Countryside services
- Libraries

As qualitative audits these aim to provide a general overview of health and safety effectiveness whilst examining key risk areas. The audit will highlight organisational as well as service specific issues.

Target areas for improvement

Common themes or significant findings highlighted improvements in the following areas:

- Identifying and ensuring role specific training is carried out.
- Risk Assessment – ensuring they are suitable and sufficient and sharing across service and teams to improve consistency of practice.

Schools

204 school H&S monitoring visits in AY 23/24
128 to maintained schools

Overall, a **good level of H&S performance** across maintained schools with only 1 primary school with less than 85% compliance.

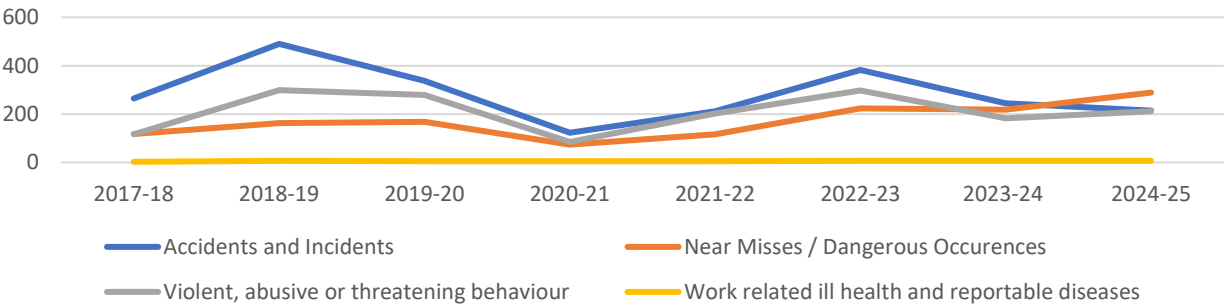| Number of Schools	Compliance % score	Compliance rating
111	95%+	Good
16	85%-94%	Some areas need improvement
1	Less than 85% compliant	Significant issues – requires improvement

Target areas for improvement

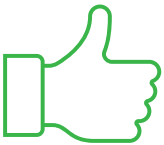Results indicate support required for schools in the following areas to improve compliance:

- Critical Incident and Emergency Planning
- Driving at work
- Water hygiene management
- Asbestos management

Accidents and incidents - services

Total number of reports by incident type – Long term view

Legend:
- Accidents and Incidents
- Near Misses / Dangerous Occurences
- Violent, abusive or threatening behaviour
- Work related ill health and reportable diseases

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	**2024-25**
Accidents and Incidents	265	490	337	123	212	382	245	214
Near Misses / Dangerous Occurences	118	163	168	74	117	224	218	289
Violent, abusive or threatening behaviour	116	299	279	85	202	298	182	212
Work related ill health and reportable diseases	3	7	5	5	5	7	7	7
Total	**502**	**959**	**789**	**287**	**536**	**911**	**652**	**722**

The total number of **accidents and incidents has fallen** 13% from the previous year.

The main causes of accidents are 1) **slips, trips and falls** 2) colliding with fixed objects 3) cuts/puncture injuries. **51% of injured persons are employees**.

The total number of **reports of violent, abusive or threatening behaviour has increased** 16% from the previous year.

Services that reported the most incidents were adult social care (32%), libraries (24%) and children's social care (23%).

Near miss reporting has increased by 33%. Near miss reporting is a positive indicator as it helps identify potential hazards before they cause harm, allowing preventative measures to be put in place.

Community Support Services, libraries and children's residential services were the top reporters of near misses. These services are commended for their positive attitude to reporting in general as well as their proactive approach to recognising near misses which demonstrate proactively trying to prevent future accidents.
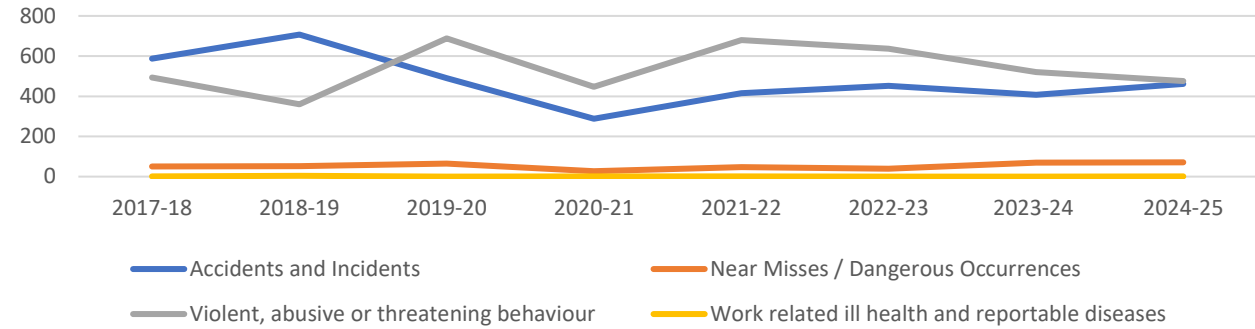
There were **7 RIDDOR** reports notified to HSE:
- 3 specified injuries to employees e.g. fractures.
- 2 injuries resulting in employees off work for more than 7 days.
- 2 service users taken to hospital from scene of accident.

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Page 46

Accidents and incidents - schools

Maintained Schools - total number of reports by incident type

Legend:
- Accidents and Incidents
- Near Misses / Dangerous Occurrences
- Violent, abusive or threatening behaviour
- Work related ill health and reportable diseases

|	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	**2024-25**
Accidents and Incidents	587	707	490	288	415	452	408	462
Near Misses / Dangerous Occurrences	50	52	65	27	47	40	70	71
Violent, abusive or threatening behaviour	494	360	688	447	679	637	521	475
Work related ill health and reportable diseases	1	4	0	1	1	0	0	1
Total	**1132**	**1123**	**1243**	**763**	**1142**	**1129**	**999**	**1009**

The total number of **accidents and incidents has increased** 13% from the previous year.
The main causes of accidents are 1) **slips, trips and falls** 2) colliding with fixed objects 3) Fall from height. **76% of injured persons are pupils**.

The total number of **reports of violent, abusive or threatening behaviour has decreased** 9% from the previous year.

From a total of 1009 reports made by circa 120 maintained schools 29% of reports were made by 3 special schools.
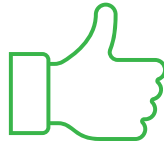
A significant proportion of accidents in primary school happened whilst pupils were using play equipment. Whilst most of these accidents are minor, some-particularly those involving climbing equipment, result in more serious injuries including fractures.

There were **60 RIDDOR** reports notified to HSE mainly involving pupils who sustained fractures or required hospital treatment.

A notice of contravention was served by the HSE in relation to a door entrapment incident where a pupil sustained partial amputation of their finger. Corrective measures have been put in place and no further action is being taken as a result.

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Accidents and incidents – fire and rescue

Financial Year	24/25				
Safety Event Type	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Injury	12	13	10	16	51
Near Miss	13	9	7	7	36
Occupational Ill Health				2	2
Unsafe Condition	2	8	4	3	17
Vehicle Incident	3	14	12	9	38
Total	30	44	33	37	144

Financial Year	24/25			
RIDDOR Type	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
		2		1
Biological Agents (Covid)				1
Breathing apparatus			1	1	2
Non-fatal accidents to non-workers				1
Over-seven-days injury		4	2	3	3
Specified injuries to worker		1	1	1
Total		7	4	6	7

Number of Investigations by Safety Event Type

Safety Event Type ● Injury ● Near Miss ● Occupational Ill Health ● Unsafe Condition ● Vehicle Incident

The total number of **accidents and incidents has increased** 13% from the previous year.
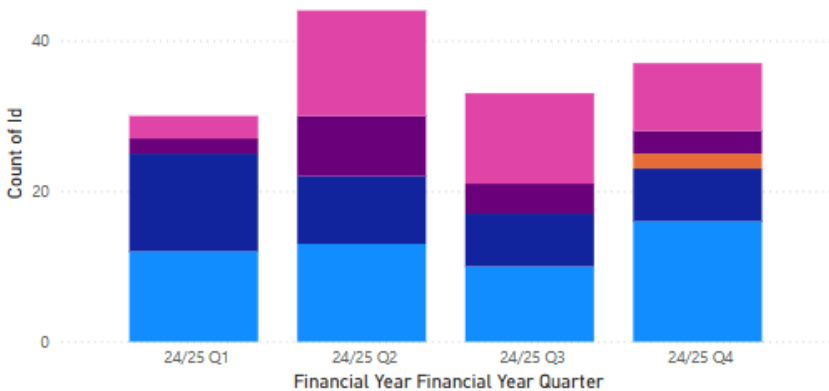The main causes of accidents are **slips, trips and falls and manual handling** including sprains, strains and twists.

There were **24 RIDDOR** reports notified to HSE of which 12 due to over 7-day injuries and 4 relating to **Breathing Apparatus.**

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H&S Action Plan

The H&S Action Plan will set out how the council plans to improve health and safety standards. This creates a focus and demonstrates our commitment to continual improvement.
The actions will be relevant to our strategic themes and be practical steps for improvement.
Progress is monitored by the Health and Safety Assurance Board and reported to Senior Leadership Team.

Leadership	**Review of H&S Assurance Board**	The H&S Assurance Board is key element of our governance framework and involvement by senior managers and key individuals is integral to its success. This involves not only understanding the current state of H&S within the organisation but also actively championing initiatives that promote a culture of safety and wellbeing. **Action:** The Director of Property (Corp Lead for H&S) will lead a review to ensure the board has clear direction, purpose and attendees.
Leadership	**Review of H&S Team resourcing**	There is a need to enable efficiencies ensuring a risk focused approach, building on strengths through improved collaborative working. The H&S functions have been brought together into a single resource within Property and Assets. **Action:** Restructure of the H&S Team will be carried out 25/26.
Risk Management	**H&S policies and procedures**	It is essential that everyone has access to up-to-date H&S information including policies, procedures and guidance. **Action:** Key H&S policies and procedures being reviewed during 25/26 including but not limited to: • Driving for Work – in collaboration with HR and Vehicle Management Service • Fire Safety – in collaboration with Property Services • Risk Assessment **Action:** As a traded service, all schools H&S information will be reviewed and transferred to the secure SLA online platform.
Risk Management	**Risk assessment**	Monitoring and engagement with services has identified differences in risk assessment. Whilst assessing risks appears to be in line with statutory guidance, various forms and tools are being used by different service areas. **Action:** A small project will look at options to improve risk assessment across the organisation including systems to track completion and provide assurance.
People	**Wellbeing**	Under H&S legislation there is a legal duty to protect workers from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it. Stress is a significant cause of sickness absence. **Action:** Support delivery of the HR and Culture Change Wellbeing project with a vision to develop a holistic approach that improves individual wellbeing, organisational performance, and employee satisfaction.
People	**MSK and manual handling**	Ill health due to Musculoskeletal (MSK) injuries is a significant cause of sickness absence. **Action:** Following on from the work around use of Display Screen Equipment the H&S Team will target activities where there is increased risk from manual handling such as library service logistics and supported transport.

People	**Role specific H&S training**	Corporate H&S Audits have highlighted a varied approach to managing role specific training. Some of this training is outside the scope of the corporate programme and organised by individual services/teams. **Action:** The H&S Team will issue guidance to managers on how to identify H&S training needs and share best practice where service/teams have systems in place to track status and completions.
People	**Accidents, incidents and near misses**	Prevention is better than cure. Near miss reporting is important so you we can deal with the hazard before anyone gets hurt. **Action:** will be promoting the need for reporting 'near-misses' which helps in raising awareness and preventing and mitigating accidents. We want to encourage a more proactive approach that encourages people to report any near-misses and use the information from incidents to review risk assessments and control methods. By doing this, we could prevent accidents before they occur.
Place	**Safe and compliant buildings**	Responsible Premises Managers (RPMs) are usually appointed by services to act as the person responsible for the day-to-day running of a building. They play a crucial role as the main point of contact for Property Services and carryout tasks such as reporting damage or faults, ensuring local emergency procedures are in place including fire and first aid and undertaking routine compliance tasks such as testing the fire alarm. **Action:** Working with Property Services the H&S Team will further develop systems and tools to enable RPMs to carryout these responsibilities efficiently and accurately including the launch of a new reporting routine tasks reporting app, improving the RPM monthly communication forum to share learning and best practice. A review to identify RPM training needs and information will also be carried out to ensure competence in this role.
Place	**Property compliance**	Our Property Services function acts to manage and maintain all the buildings and land that are needed for council services. **Action**: Following the success of inhouse fire system engineers Property Services have recognised the benefits of self-delivery to deliver maintenance to the properties and will continue to adopt this providing further advances in best value and compliance. The team are looking to bring all aspects of electrical maintenance from Fixed wire testing and PAT testing to installations supporting minor works where feasible.
Learning and improving	**Corporate H&S audit programme**	The Corporate Health and Safety Team undertake a programme of health and safety audits and inspections to check that preventative and protective control measures are implemented and effective. **Action:** A range of H&S Audits and inspections will be carried out during 25/26 to assess compliance.
Learning and improving	**Schools H&S annual monitoring**	The council has H&S responsibility for controlled, voluntary controlled and community schools. To provide assurance that school leaders and Governing Bodies are compliant and meeting their responsibilities using their devolved powers the council will undertake annual inspections as part of its schools traded service. **Action:** The H&S Team will review the current monitoring process for 25/26 to ensure it covers key areas of risk.
Learning and Improving	**Property contractor assurance**	Steps are being taken to monitor contractor performance for H&S. **Action**: A new Property Contractor Audit Programme has been created and will be further imbedded in 25/26.

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

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