



PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 16 January 2026 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 4.06 pm.

Present:

Voting Members:

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

**Other Members in
Attendance:**

Cllr Leffman, Leader of the Council
Cllr Fawcett, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet
Member for Resources
Cllr Bearder, Cabinet Member for Adults
Cllr Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
Cllr Gregory, Cabinet Member for Public Health and
Inequalities
Cllr Hannaby, Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing
and Safety
Cllr Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and
Transformation
Cllr Roberts, Cabinet Member for Place, Environment and
Climate Change
Cllr James Barlow
Cllr Liz Brighthouse
Cllr Gareth Epps
Cllr James Fry
Cllr Emma Garnett
Cllr Robin Jones
Cllr Emily Kerr
Cllr Gavin McLauchlan
Cllr Susanna Pressel
Cllr James Robertshaw
Cllr Tony Worgan

Officers:

Martin Reeves, Chief Executive
Lorna Baxter, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151
Officer
Ansaf Azhar, Director for Public Health and Communities
Annette Perrington, Deputy Director of Education and
Inclusion
Delia Mann, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care
Ian Dyson, Director of Financial and Commercial Services

Karen Fuller, Director of Adult Social Services
Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance
Natalie Crawford, Capital Programme Manager
Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways
Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director for
Community Safety
Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place
Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs and Policy
Partnerships
Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Manager

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

1/26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Ley, substituted by Cllr Batstone.

2/26 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

Cllr Smith declared that her daughter worked for Oxfordshire Educational Services.

3/26 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The minutes of the meeting held on 05 December 2025 were **APPROVED** as a true and accurate record.

4/26 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 4)

Cllr Robert Parker, Shirburn Parish, sent his apologies however the Chair agreed that his comments on the Watlington Relief Road should be read out by the Scrutiny Manager. (Full text is appended to these minutes)

Cllr Boucher-Giles arrived at this stage.

5/26 BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2026/27 TO 2030/31

(Agenda No. 5)

All Cabinet members and directors have been invited to present a report on the Budget Proposals for 2026/27 – 2030/31.

Present for the item were:

- Cllr Leffman, Leader of the Council
- Cllr Fawcett, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for Resources
- Cllr Bearder, Cabinet Member for Adults
- Cllr Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
- Cllr Gregory, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Inequalities
- Cllr Hannaby, Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing and Safety
- Cllr Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation
- Cllr Roberts, Cabinet Member for Place, Environment and Climate Change
- Martin Reeves, Chief Executive
- Lorna Baxter, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer
- Ansaf Azhar, Director for Public Health and Communities
- Annette Perrington, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion
- Delia Mann, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care
- Ian Dyson, Director of Financial and Commercial Services
- Karen Fuller, Director of Adult Social Services
- Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance
- Natalie Crawford, Capital Programme Manager
- Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways
- Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director for Community Safety
- Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place
- Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs and Policy Partnerships
- Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets

All other Council Members were invited to attend as guests, those attending included:

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------|
| • Cllr Barlow | • Cllr Kerr |
| • Cllr Brighouse | • Cllr McLauchlan |
| • Cllr Epps | • Cllr Pressel |
| • Cllr Fry | • Cllr Robertshaw |
| • Cllr Garnett | • Cllr Worgan |
| • Cllr Jones | |

The Leader of the Council introduced the budget item explaining that the government's Fair Funding Review had resulted in a reduction of approximately £24 million in funding for Oxfordshire, creating a budget gap of £5.4 million for the current year. She noted that the Council had received a three-year settlement, which was appreciated as it aided planning, whilst also noting the challenge of larger budget gaps of £19.4 million and £25.9 million in the following two years. The Leader thanked Officers for their work in preparing the budget under tight timelines and emphasised the need to present a balanced budget and maintain the Council's strong financial position ahead of local government reorganisation.

Budget introduction

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, stated that the Council faced an uncomfortable financial position, with a current budget gap of £5.4

million. He suggested future options to close the budget gap, including £1.5 million in real cuts to services, alongside other measures such as reducing contingency funds, though future years would present greater difficulties. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation noted that the government's multi-year settlement was helpful but had come late and meant that the Council was effectively required to raise Council tax by the maximum amount, reducing its autonomy. He highlighted ongoing uncertainties, especially around funding for children with high needs and the accumulated deficit within the High Needs Block.

The Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer presented an overview of the budget, recapping the funding changes and the context for the current financial year. She explained that the budget setting process had been unusually challenging due to late and significant changes in government information. The Fair Funding Review consultation, which built on previous consultations, had only been completed in late November, with the provisional local finance settlement published just before Christmas. The Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer highlighted that the three-year settlement was the first since 2016/17 and, while welcome for planning purposes, it still entailed funding reductions over the medium term.

She detailed the implications of the settlement. Transitional arrangements and resource equalisation across local authorities continued to affect funding, and the Council tax referendum principles remained unchanged, allowing a maximum increase of 4.99% per year. The Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer clarified that the government's calculation of core spending power assumed Council tax increases and a higher tax base growth than the Council's own forecasts, resulting in a real reduction in grant funding of £24.1 million over three years, rising to £29.3 million when other factors were considered.

She also addressed the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and SEND deficits, noting new government expectations that local authorities would bear some of the financial burden, though the extent remained unclear. The Council planned to increase its contribution to the demographic risk reserve to £8 million per year to prudently manage the rising deficit, which was expected to reach £160 million by year-end.

Councillors sought clarification on the authority's current level of borrowing, and the Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer explained that borrowing stood at approximately £420 million, representing under 5.5% of the Council's revenue budget. She emphasised that this remained within prudent limits, but any further increase would reduce the Council's flexibility to respond to emerging pressures. The Committee reflected on the importance of disciplined borrowing so that essential services were not compromised in future years.

There was also member interest in the drivers behind the lower-than-expected Council tax base growth. The Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer clarified that the main factor was a backlog in the Valuation Office, with around 2,000 homes in South and Vale awaiting banding. This administrative delay, rather than reduced housing completions or planning permissions, had temporarily suppressed growth. As these properties were added in future years, the tax base was expected to rise again.

Further clarification was provided around the proportion of unbanded homes within the tax base. Officers confirmed that the 2,000 properties represented approximately 0.8% of the total and that, had they been included, the Council would have exceeded its tax base growth target. They also confirmed that the Council tax surplus was expected to be slightly above £8 million, with no major concerns identified at that point.

A number of questions were asked about the DSG override and the implications of its potential removal. The Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer explained that Councils could not currently borrow to manage the DSG deficit unless government policy changed. The main impact for Oxfordshire was reduced cash balances and consequently lower interest income. Borrowing would only be required if reserves fell below safe levels. If the government removed the override, the Council would not need to borrow immediately, but any future expectation from government that Councils should cover the deficit would influence the medium-term financial plan. These uncertainties, she noted, were the reason for proposing an increase to the demographic risk reserve.

Members expressed concern about the impact of reduced government funding and asked what evidence existed that all reasonable alternatives to a 4.99% Council tax rise had been explored. Officers confirmed that efficiency savings, reprioritisation exercises and prudent use of reserves had all been considered extensively, but that even after taking these measures into account, the full increase was still necessary. Not taking the maximum allowable rise would, they emphasised, have a compounding negative impact over future years.

The Head of Corporate Finance then summarised the Council's overall funding position. The budget deficit for 2026/27 was £5.4 million, rising to £19.4 million in 2027/28 and £25.9 million in 2028/29.

The Capital Programme Manager introduced the capital programme, noting that financial constraints continued to be challenging. She outlined statutory compliance, revenue-generating schemes, cost-avoidance initiatives, and key commitments such as highway improvements, active travel infrastructure, and energy efficiency projects. The programme had undergone a significant review, resulting in recommendations to reduce or return budgets, including £2 million from the East Oxford neighbourhood project, £7.1 million from the mortuary scheme, and £4.5 million from joint-use agreements. Total available capital funding of £24.1 million was fully allocated to essential schemes, with some projects supplemented by Section 106 contributions.

During discussion, Councillors asked whether the Council's active-travel-related capital categories included the Watlington Relief Road. Officers confirmed that it did, noting that £3 million had been allocated within the broader category of schemes that encouraged active travel and town improvements.

There were also questions about the decision to remove £2 million from the East Oxford neighbourhood scheme. Some Councillors queried whether the Council was relying on additional Section 106 contributions to progress particular projects. Officers confirmed that this was not the case: the Council was seeking to use its own funding to unlock schemes where existing developer contributions were insufficient. While in

theory it was possible to forecast how much Section 106 funding might be unlocked by the Council's £2 million allocation, officers explained that such forecasting required detailed programme work, which had not yet been undertaken.

The Committee also explored the rationale for reducing the mortuary budget by £7.1 million. Officers reported that the contract with the current provider had been extended, while discussions continued with NHS partners about a joint long-term facility. In the short term, defined as the next five years, current capacity was adequate, although future growth would require investment.

Law and Governance

The Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer presented the budget proposals for resources, law, and governance. She outlined an ongoing financial pressure of £500,000 due to the continued reliance on legal locums, as well as increased costs associated with the coroner's service, including a £300,000 contract extension and a £100,000 adjustment to ensure pay parity with judicial scales. The committee noted that coroners, as judicial office holders, must be paid according to Judicial College and Senior Salaries Review Body guidelines. Additionally, she highlighted that an 8.3% increase in members' allowances has created a further financial pressure of £100,000.

Transformation, Digital, and Customer Experience

The Director for Property and Assets described a £300,000 ongoing cost for the new housing team, temporarily funded from the transformation reserve but expected to generate future savings. He also identified £250,000 of savings from reduced energy costs and a further £250,000 from facilities management efficiencies. The Director of Financial and Commercial Services explained the £800,000 investment in reorganised financial and commercial services, particularly procurement, with the expectation that equivalent savings would be delivered.

Councillors sought clarity on planned uses of the crisis and resilience fund. Officers explained that a detailed proposal would return to Cabinet in April. Last year, over half the fund had supported children eligible for free school meals during holidays and additional amounts had supported the resident support scheme. Members also asked how the Council-maintained school meal quality without increasing prices despite food inflation. Officers confirmed that the service was subsidised, and that efficiencies, such as moving from fresh to frozen food, had enabled the Council to maintain standards.

The Director for Property and Assets then outlined several capital proposals, including £150,000 for works at the Kidlington Forum to support children's activities and staff moves, and £250,000 for fire crew housing upgrades driven by recent inspections highlighting issues with plumbing and boilers.

Questions were raised about the level of spending on IT consultants, and Officers explained that the majority of IT investment was operational, covering hardware refreshes such as laptops, migration to cloud systems to reduce data centre costs, cybersecurity improvements, and system integration. They emphasised that this

programme was largely delivered in-house and did not represent significant consultancy expenditure.

The Director of Public Affairs and Policy Partnerships, the Director of Financial and Commercial Services and the Director for Property and Assets left the meeting at this stage.

Public Health and Communities

The Cabinet Member for Public Health & Inequalities then introduced the Public Health and Communities budget. She noted that the public health grant was ring-fenced and now part of a three-year settlement, improving planning but still following a decade of real-terms reductions. The Director for Public Health and Communities provided further detail, explaining that the grant covered statutory services including health checks, drug and alcohol treatment, and school nursing, which consumed about 80% of the budget. Public health also supported other Council functions where possible and contributed to capital investments across libraries and heritage, including significant Section 106-supported schemes.

The Committee discussed the relationship between the Marmot approach and the Council's public health resources. The Director for Public Health and Communities explained that becoming a Marmot County required systemic participation across all services, and that public health alone could not deliver the necessary reductions in inequality. He noted that although additional funding would help, the broader impact came from redesigning services across the Council and its partners.

Members also raised the potential for invest-to-save initiatives within public health. The Director for Public Health and Communities confirmed that many activities did have a demonstrable return, though these were often long-term and benefits were frequently realised by partners such as the NHS. He gave examples including drug and alcohol services, the alcohol care team and the Move Together programme. He also addressed questions about deprivation, noting that although the most deprived had improved relative to the country, the gap deprivation gap remained large with some areas seeing deprivation worsen.

There were questions about whether Section 106 and CIL funds could support public-health-related infrastructure. The Director for Public Health and Communities confirmed that whilst these funds could not be used for service delivery, they could support facilities such as libraries and community hubs with public health value, and the Council should remain alert to such opportunities. Members also asked about the reason for the concentration of library investments in the South and Vale districts. The Deputy Leader explained that this reflected both need, assessed by the libraries plan and local deprivation, and the availability of developer contributions, which varied by district.

The Chief Executive emphasised that while increased public health funding would be useful, it risked creating over-reliance on public health teams rather than ensuring systemic change across the organisation. He stressed the importance of collaboration across services and highlighted that many benefits flowed to acute health services rather than the Council.

A question was raised about the absence of a specific budget line for climate-change adaptation within public health. The Director for Public Health and Communities explained that although not explicitly listed, public health-related climate interventions were ongoing across other departments, with strong collaboration on food strategy, air quality and active travel. He also confirmed that funding previously tied to homelessness and domestic abuse had been consolidated but that core activities were still being delivered.

Cllr Shiri left the meeting at this stage.

The Cabinet Member for Place, Environment and Climate Change, The Cabinet Member for Transport Management, The Director for Environment and Highways and The Director for Economy and Place joined the meeting at this stage. The Cabinet Member for Public Health & Inequalities left the meeting at this stage.

Environment and Highways

The Cabinet Member for Transport Management introduced the Environment and Highways budget. He explained that the aim had been to safeguard highway maintenance and park and ride fares amidst difficult financial conditions. The Director for Environment and Highways then elaborated on the pressures facing the service. Increased highway assets from new developments had raised maintenance costs, which were being offset through the use of commuted sums.

Similar approaches were being applied to network management, using permit income and reserves to cover new demands such as real-time information displays and CCTV. Routine maintenance pressures relating to defects, lining and grass cutting could not be covered by reserves and required additional revenue, while increasing waste volumes were being partly supported by extended producer responsibility (EPR) funding.

The Director for Environment and Highways also described the growing costs of ash dieback, necessitating more extensive action and funding, and provided an overview of the fees and charges strategy.

Councillors questioned the decision to hold on-street parking charges in Oxford City, noting the importance of encouraging park and ride use. Officers explained that charges served both behavioural and revenue functions, and that increases implemented in the previous year were still being monitored. A query followed about the deteriorating slabs outside the Westgate shopping centre. Officers clarified that this issue lay outside the city-centre regeneration budget and was being dealt with through joint arrangements with Westgate and Crown Estates.

Members sought further clarity on public-realm improvements in market towns. It was agreed that such discussions were best held at locality meetings to allow Councillors to engage with specific local schemes.

There was also discussion of the use of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding. Officers explained that the first year had focused on one-off projects, but

once funding became ongoing it was incorporated into the base budget to manage increased disposal costs. They confirmed that EPR was ring-fenced for waste services.

Questions were raised about emissions-trading liabilities in the waste service. Officers confirmed that anticipated new burdens were included in the budget, alongside equally estimated grant funding. Councillors also queried the rationale for subsidising park and ride ticketing and whether similar subsidies could be extended to other bus routes. Officers highlighted the significant costs of general fare subsidies and referenced the recent “MyBus” scheme, which had greatly exceeded its budget.

Some members raised concerns about the £15 fee for non-Oxfordshire residents at Household Waste Recycling Centres, particularly for residents living near county borders. Officers explained that the fee was competitive and aimed at covering service costs while avoiding higher charges seen elsewhere. Discussions with neighbouring authorities about reciprocal arrangements were ongoing.

A Councillor noted an omission in the fees and charges schedule relating to a previously agreed two-hour parking charge in Zone 2, including Jericho. Officers acknowledged the oversight and agreed to correct it before finalising the budget. Members also explored differences between parking permit charges across the county. Officers confirmed that charges reflected local costs and that harmonisation was not planned. On-street parking charges would continue to be set based on local demand patterns.

Further questions were asked about congestion charging, traffic filters and zero-emission zones. Officers explained that each scheme operated within its own accounting envelope, with income and costs handled separately and surpluses kept in dedicated reserves. They confirmed that all schemes remained part of the work programme.

The Director for Environment and Highways then outlined the capital investment plans for Environment and Highways, including investment in public-rights-of-way, bridges, the Oxford city centre regeneration programme, and public-realm improvements in market towns. He highlighted the Quiet Lanes programme, investment in Wantage marketplace and the Wantage Relief Road, drainage network repairs, tree replacement and nursery development, essential HWRC maintenance, and land acquisition for a new Bicester recycling facility.

Cllr Mallon left the meeting at this stage.

The Watlington Relief Road prompted further debate, with Councillors questioning how it had become a Council project, why costs had increased and whether alternatives had been properly considered. Officers and cabinet members responded that the scheme had been established in previous growth deals and planning agreements, and that significant delays, many related to environmental objections, had increased costs. Alternatives such as HGV ANPR enforcement had been examined, but legal and practical barriers meant the relief road remained the only viable long-term solution.

Drainage investment also drew scrutiny. Councillors noted that historic under-investment had resulted in expensive repairs as gully clearing exposed widespread failures. Officers acknowledged that while the new £4 million allocation would help, it was not sufficient to address all problems. Some repairs, such as replacing undersized pipes, would be prioritised, but national lobbying for increased capital funding would still be required.

Questions continued regarding the Oxford city centre regeneration budget. Officers clarified that the line item included delivery of the Cornmarket and Queen Street projects, while a separate public realm line focused on improvements along major routes such as the approach from the station. Councillors also asked about the status of Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWHIPs). Officers explained that the Council was completing LCWHIPs across the county before updating existing ones, including the Oxford LCWHIP, which was due for review.

Cllr Shiri rejoined the meeting at this stage. The Cabinet Member for Transport Management, Cllr Boucher-Giles, and the Chief Executive left the meeting at this stage.

Economy and Place

The Cabinet Member for Place, Environment and Climate Change introduced the Economy and Place budget, emphasising investment in the rail strategy, which was essential to the county's long-term transport plan and broader aims of supporting sustainable travel. They also highlighted the £2 million allocation for Section 106-related projects, noting that this had reduced slightly due to limited new schemes coming through the pipeline after previous successful years.

The Director for Economy and Place added that the budget supported economic development and infrastructure planning, including the strategic use of enterprise zone funding. He referred to preparations for local government reorganisation and potential devolution, and to ongoing investment in flood resilience, including grants for town and parish Councils and recruitment of more flood wardens. Work on business cases within the OXRAIL 2040 plan also continued.

The Committee discussed concerns about outdated drainage infrastructure and the impact on flooding. Officers confirmed that while proactive measures were being taken, the scale of the required upgrades exceeded available funds. Some issues identified in Section 19 flood investigations fell within the remit of other agencies such as Thames Water, highlighting the need for joint working and national lobbying.

There were also questions about the rationale for allocating significant revenue to strategic planning in advance of any future strategic authority or mayoral model. Officers explained that recent legislation required principal authorities to prepare spatial development strategies even without devolution, and regulations were expected soon. Early investment would place the Council in a stronger position and reduce delays if new structures came forward.

Members then asked about discussions with other upper-tier authorities in the Thames Valley about pooling resources for strategic planning. Officers confirmed that

conversations were underway, with chief executives and directors meeting recently to explore collaboration in sharing evidence and preparing for potential regional strategies.

The Cabinet Member for Place, Environment and Climate Change, The Director for Environment and Highways and The Director for Economy and Place left the meeting at this stage. The Chief Executive rejoined the meeting at this stage.

The Committee adjourned at 13:20 for lunch and reconvened at 14:00.

Fire and Community Safety

The Director for Community Wellbeing and Safety introduced the budget proposals for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. Chief Fire Officer and Director for Community Safety outlined key pressures facing the service. He explained that a government grant introduced after the Grenfell Tower disaster had previously supported the Fire Protection team, but the reduction in this grant created a budget challenge. Additional pressures stemmed from rising ill-health and injury costs for firefighters, increased expenditure on PPE, and the impact of contract inflation on the fire-engine replacement programme. A national programme to upgrade mobile communications across emergency services was expected to create both one-off and ongoing costs.

Councillors explored whether discretionary fees could generate more income. Officers explained that most charges in the fire service were statutory and set nationally, limiting opportunities for additional revenue. Questions were also raised about coordination between Council services and health regulators. Officers noted that collaboration had strengthened significantly, with shared initiatives across public health, tobacco control and physical activity contributing to improved outcomes. Members sought reassurance about preparations for local government reorganisation. Officers and Councillors described ongoing work on strategic planning, economic development and infrastructure to ensure a smooth transition. They emphasised that early preparation was crucial for future success.

There were also questions about whether penalties imposed for inspection failures covered the full cost of inspections. Officers explained that statutory fees and penalties were nationally set and did not necessarily reflect the actual cost to the Council. As a result, the fire service often absorbed additional unfunded costs. Members asked about the impact of recent government consultation processes. Officers confirmed that the budget had been prepared using confirmed information and had not incorporated potential changes from consultations whose outcomes were unknown.

The Director for Community Wellbeing and Safety and Chief Fire Officer and Director for Community Safety left the meeting at this stage

Adult Social Care

The Cabinet Member for Adults opened the discussion on the Adult Social Services budget. He noted that services had undergone significant cuts since 2021, driven by

national funding changes, and that while many savings had been achieved through redesigning services, few easy options remained.

Director of Adult Social Services expanded on the financial pressures. Updated demographic modelling had brought a slight improvement, but inflation was expected to add £5.6 million to care package costs. Additional pressures included the failure of the previous community equipment provider and increased costs for learning-disability contracts. High-cost placements for young people transitioning to adult services would increase expenditure by a further £3.6 million, though efforts to secure efficiencies through contract reviews and in-house provision continued.

Councillors asked about residential-care fee levels. Officers explained that the budget included an uplift to ensure sustainability in the market and alignment with inflationary and workforce pressures. Questions followed about whether collaboration with other authorities could deliver savings. Officers confirmed ongoing work on joint commissioning and shared services, recognising the importance of economies of scale.

There was also discussion about the allocation of Section 106 funding within adult social services. Officers emphasised strict compliance with legal agreements and confirmed that any changes in allocation were reviewed by legal and planning teams. Councillors asked whether current money-saving initiatives were sufficient for long-term sustainability. Officers responded that while efficiency measures were important, long-term stability required national reform of adult social care funding.

Members raised concerns about increasing delays in hospital discharge and their impact on social care. Officers acknowledged significant pressure on resources, explaining that reablement and community care services were working closely with the NHS to address backlogs. Questions were also raised about the need for additional in-house accommodation. Officers confirmed that demand was rising and that further investment was being explored, although such expansion required significant capital.

The Cabinet Member for Adults and Director of Adult Social Services left the meeting at this stage.

Children, Education and Families

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People introduced the Children's Services budget. The Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion described the escalating costs facing the service due to national reforms and rising demand, particularly in children's social care and SEND services. High-cost placements had increased, with average placements costing over £400,000 per year, and efforts to reduce expenditure through kinship care and fostering had not delivered the anticipated savings. A shortage of educational psychologists and the need for additional casework and agency staff created further pressures. The service planned to manage demand, improve recruitment and retention, and draw on a £3.1 million increase in the Children, Families and Youth Grant to offset challenges where possible.

Councillors sought more detail on the 100% adjustment for savings, asking why it was required. Officers explained it reflected the need to fully deliver planned savings in a climate of rising pressures, including high-cost placements now averaging over £100,000 per year. Members also queried expanding in-house children's homes to reduce external costs. Officers said this was being explored, but required significant upfront investment, specialist staffing, and suitable premises.

Members queried the £2.6 million expenditure at Woodeaton, including whether the sale of the old building might offset costs. Officers confirmed that disposal of the old site was being considered and that ongoing costs would depend on staffing, maintenance and service delivery at the new facility. Concerns were also raised about school meal budgets, with Officers confirming that costs depended on uptake; although some eligible families did not claim free school meals, the Council encouraged all to apply despite the budgetary implications.

Questions were also asked about savings associated with reducing agency staff. Officers expressed cautious optimism that recruitment improvements would support these savings, though challenges remained. SEND transport costs also generated discussion. Officers explained that rising demand, increased complexity and longer travel distances were all contributing factors, and that routes, policies and independent travel training were being reviewed to manage costs.

Finally, members sought clarity on the SEND deficit and recent government statements. Officers reported that government had indicated that Councils would not be expected to cover the deficit from their general funds, with future support coming from departmental spending limits. However, details remained unclear and posed continued uncertainty for financial planning.

The Committee **AGREED** to the following actions:

- Officers would report back to the Committee, how many spaces each individual market town has compared to Oxford city
- Officers would re-share the justification and plans for the Watlington relief road, to explain how the Council have arrived at the current plans.

The Committee **AGREED** to recommendations under the following headings:

- That greater detail of the contribution non-Public Health areas make to the Council's Marmot agenda is provided within the Council's budget report, particularly in relation to mitigating the negative health impacts of climate change.
- That 2-hour parking in Oxford City in Zone 2 is included within the list of fees and charges in the Council's budget report.
- That Council is provided with the options appraisal used when assessing to progress with the Watlington Relief Road as part of the budget report.

- That plans for Public Realm Improvement expenditure are brought to members at Localities meetings.
- That the Council writes to the Valuation Office Agency to raise the issue of 2000 homes without council tax bands.
- That the Council collates and reviews direct feedback from children, where available, from schools, concerning the quality of current school meals.

6/26 SOCIAL VALUE POLICY (Agenda No. 6)

Cllr Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Martin Reeves, Chief Executive, Ian Dyson, Director for Financial and Commercial Services, and Max Button, Commercial Excellence Lead, were invited to present a report on a draft of the refresh of the Council's Social Value policy.

The Cabinet Member and Officers introduced the Social Value Policy by outlining its purpose and the strategic direction it would set for Oxfordshire County Council. The Cabinet Member for Finance emphasised that the policy sought to ensure the Council's procurement and commissioning activities delivered benefits that extended beyond strict financial return. The intention was to embed social value into all contracts so that local priorities, such as sustainability, inclusion, and economic development, were actively supported through public spending. By positioning social value at the centre of procurement, the Council aimed to strengthen community outcomes and promote long-term wellbeing for residents.

The Director for Financial and Commercial Services discussed how the policy would operate in practice. He explained that it would provide a clear framework for Officers, enabling consistent assessment and maximisation of social value within procurement processes. The policy was designed to ensure Officers had accessible guidance, measurable outcomes and transparent evaluation methods, so that consideration of social value became a routine element in decision-making. He noted that embedding these principles required sustained cultural change, supported through training and ongoing oversight.

The Commercial Excellence Lead added that the policy would strengthen the Council's ability to work constructively with suppliers and partners, encouraging innovation and collaboration. He highlighted that meaningful social impact depended on strong relationships and the ability to track, monitor and report on commitments. Building a cycle of continuous improvement was essential, ensuring that the policy delivered real change rather than becoming a procedural formality.

During discussion, members raised concerns that social value risked being interpreted too narrowly if seen purely as a procurement exercise. They pointed to County Durham's "Durham Pound" as an example of a wider approach that considered the full range of a Council's activities and assets, including land and property. Members questioned why the current policy focused exclusively on procurement when social value could be embedded more broadly across Council functions.

In response, Officers acknowledged that while procurement was the initial focus, the wider potential was recognised. They agreed that future iterations of the policy should expand to include broader applications of social value, particularly in the context of forthcoming local government reorganisation. The Chief Executive reinforced this point, cautioning against a narrow interpretation and encouraging a more ambitious, place-based model aligned with strategic county-wide priorities.

Further questions explored how work on social value beyond procurement would be captured within Council processes. Officers confirmed that the current version of the policy did not yet cover this wider scope but recognised the need for a more holistic approach that integrated social value considerations into land management, property decisions and other operational were. Members expressed support for developing a more comprehensive strategic framework to ensure that social value was embedded across all directorates.

The Committee also examined the application of the policy to tenders over £100,000. Members were concerned that the requirements might inadvertently discourage smaller local businesses from bidding, particularly if the process became overly complex. Officers stressed that the policy had been designed to be proportionate, with expectations scaled to the size and nature of contracts. They reiterated that supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) was a key priority and confirmed that the impact on smaller suppliers would be monitored to ensure the policy remained accessible and fair.

Questions were then raised about the Council's ability to respond when suppliers failed to deliver on their social value commitments. Officers explained that these commitments formed part of the contractual obligations, enforceable through standard contract-management processes. Where delivery fell short, the Council could require remedial actions, withhold payments, or ultimately terminate the contract. Members stressed the importance of clear expectations, strong monitoring, and robust contract management to uphold accountability and secure meaningful outcomes.

The meeting concluded with discussion on how environmental sustainability objectives were embedded within procurement. Officers confirmed that sustainability was a core strand of the policy, with tenders required to demonstrate how they would contribute to carbon reduction, resource efficiency and wider climate-action priorities. Members emphasised that environmental goals must be integrated throughout the contract lifecycle, from tender design through to delivery and evaluation. There was collective agreement that the Council should continue strengthening its approach to ensure alignment with corporate climate ambitions and to promote high-quality, sustainable practice among suppliers.

The Committee **AGREED** to finalise their recommendations offline, with the broad topics to relate to:

- Consideration of having a light-touch set of social value requirements for smaller contracts

- Increasing the social value options with regards to climate change measures
- Having targets and proven, impactful projects which focus on the key priorities the Council would like to address in relation to social value
- Having the procurement element of social value be more explicitly aligned with the rest of the Council's approach, and to work towards bringing the Council's approach into alignment with other local anchor institutions.

7/26 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 7)

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

8/26 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN
(Agenda No. 8)

The Committee **AGREED** to the proposed forward work plan, with the following inclusions:

- Social Value policy within a year
- Public Health equality report would return in Dec 2026

Members were also encouraged to send additional suggestions to the Scrutiny Manager.

The Committee expressed desire for a ICB representative to attend the Adult Social Care focused BMMR item in April.

9/26 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 9)

The Committee **NOTED** the cabinet responses to the Devolution report.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing