



PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Wednesday, 12 November 2025 commencing at 10.01 am and finishing at 4.12 pm.

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liam Walker - in the Chair
Councillor Thomas Ashby
Councillor Chris Brant
Councillor Laura Gordon
Councillor Emily Kerr
Councillor Dr Nathan Ley
Councillor Diana Lugova
Councillor Susanna Pressel
Councillor Leigh Rawlins

Other Members in Attendance: Cllr Liz Leffman, the Leader of the Council
Cllr Jenny Hannaby, Cabinet member for Community Safety
Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Place, Environment, and Climate Action

Officers: Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer (Deputy Chief Executive)
Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety
Helen Mitchell, Programme Director: Local Government Reorganisation
Robin Rogers, Director of Environment and Place
Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships
Hannah Battye, Head of Place Shaping
Pete Brunskill, Rail Development Lead
Ian Dyson, Director of Financial and Commercial Services
Ashley Hayden, Transport Policy and Strategy Team Lead
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

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.

5/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Thomas, substituted by Cllr Lugova, and Cllr McLean, substituted by Cllr Ley.

Apologies were also received from Martin Reeves, Chief Executive, for agenda item 12.

6/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

7/25 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

Subject to amendments where words had been missed in the draft for recommendations in 48/45, the Committee **APPROVED** the minutes of the meetings held on 24 September 2025 as true and accurate records of the meetings.

These had been adjusted for the report to Cabinet and would be corrected in the minutes.

8/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 4)

Charlie Maynard, MP, the Member of Parliament for Witney, addressed the Committee stating that he was pleased the Witney Rail project had been included in the OxRail 2040 strategy, highlighting its importance for accommodating new housing in West Oxfordshire and alleviating severe congestion on the A40. He pointed out that the draft document did not fully acknowledge the extensive work already completed on the project's feasibility and cost-effectiveness. Charlie Maynard urged the committee to amend the strategy to allow for the rail line's construction within the current plan period, rather than only afterwards, and suggested specific wording changes to reflect ongoing efforts and provide flexibility. He confirmed that these proposed amendments had been circulated to members.

The Committee also **NOTED** the letter from Phil Evans, a transport professional and local resident who was unable to attend, regarding the OxRail 2040 report.

9/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 5)

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

10/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS

(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet response on the Oxford Temporary Congestion Charge.

11/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda No. 7)

The Committee **APPROVED** the forward work plan with additions.

February's agenda will include road safety, mobility hubs, and potential Fire and Rescue changes, with input before the Cabinet meeting. April already included three items scheduled, and committee involvement in the fire cover model was under discussion.

It was also **NOTED** that written responses to previous road safety questions had been published with the meeting minutes.

12/25 OXRAIL 2040: PLAN FOR RAIL

(Agenda No. 8)

The Committee invited Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Place, Environment and Climate Action, to present the report as well as Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place, and Pete Brunskill, Rail Development Lead, to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet Member and Director of Economy and Place introduced the OxRail 2040 report, emphasising its ambitious scope, year-long development, and the exceptional number of consultation responses it received. Widely supported, the plan aims to outline Oxfordshire's connectivity needs and build a strong investment case, with a focus on achievable outcomes. They noted recent government approval for the Cowley branch line as a key milestone. The Rail Development Lead highlighted intensified planning efforts since June, including collaboration with WSP consultancy, broad engagement across the council and rail industry, and significant stakeholder support. The recent release of the Government's Railways Bill was mentioned as aligning with the plan's aspirations and providing future opportunities for mayoral authorities in rail development.

The Committee raised the following questions:

- How would the plan remain a living document, expressing concern that it might become static and unused, and sought clarification on how flexibility would be maintained to adapt to opportunities and changes. Officers responded that the plan had been designed with ongoing partnership structures and regular engagement with rail operators and infrastructure providers, ensuring relationships and project updates would continue through organisational changes. Officers stated that the plan would be revisited and updated as projects progressed, with live groups working on specific stations and studies, and that

monitoring and evaluation frameworks were included to support ongoing review and adaptation, so the document would remain relevant and responsive.

- Whether any proposals had been considered but excluded from the plan due to a lack of support from the rail industry. Officers replied that nearly all items with a realistic pathway to delivery had been included, and nothing significant had been omitted for lack of industry support. The only example given was the proposed "science line," which the rail industry felt was excessive alongside the Oxfordshire Metro concept, so it was removed; otherwise, the plan reflected projects with industry backing and feasible delivery routes.
- Members asked about the climate impact assessment, specifically whether the plan could be more ambitious regarding biodiversity net gain, such as planting wildflowers and hedgerows along railway lines, and whether unused rail land could be used for housing. Officers responded that biodiversity and environmental improvements were central to the plan, with ongoing discussions about greening infrastructure and collaboration with Network Rail's climate action team, including proposals for local solar power. The importance of ambitious biodiversity measures, was acknowledged, and Officers confirmed that housing near railways was being considered in partnership with the new rail property company, with master planning for stations like Banbury.
- Members enquired whether unused rail land could be utilised for housing, noting the potential for well-insulated homes near railway lines. Officers replied that this approach was supported by government policy and was a mission of the new rail property company, Platform, to bring forward housing near railways. Officers cited examples of successful developments and expressed a desire to see more housing around stations like Banbury, highlighting the benefits of connectivity and reduced car dependency.
- Concerns were raised regarding differing feasibility studies by Oxfordshire County Council and West Oxfordshire District Council on the proposed Witney–Carterton–Oxford rail line, with fears that high-density development along the A40 corridor could exacerbate congestion even if a railway is built. Officers clarified that development should not rely on the rail line's delivery, as it is not guaranteed. Officers stressed the need to explore mass rapid transit alternatives, including rail and other options, and highlighted ongoing collaboration between planning teams. A new study on a mass rapid transit corridor is underway to inform future development and transport strategies for the A40 corridor.
- How the strategy would improve the volume of train services across the county, referencing issues such as overcrowded two-carriage trains. Officers responded that recent and planned investments would bring more frequent and higher-capacity trains, including new five-carriage battery-electric units, and that the Oxfordshire Metro concept aimed to deliver a significant uplift in service frequency and quality. They also mentioned that rolling stock improvements and increased services were being supported by both the rail industry and government, with the aim of transforming public transport provision in the area.

- Officers stated that the strategy prioritised rural connectivity, including villages and communities far from stations, by focusing on active travel links and improved access. The consultation engaged with neighbouring authorities and community rail partnerships to address the needs of rural residents and support cross-boundary travel.
- The strategy could benefit from a more explicit identification of the organisations responsible for delivery, clarification of the council's role as an influencer, recognition of relevant dependencies, and inclusion of realistic timelines for the four priority programmes. Officers concurred, noting that detailed lead responsibilities, dependencies, and anticipated timeframes, potentially presented in a table or roadmap, would enhance public understanding and may be incorporated into future iterations of the plan.
- The issue of accessibility for wheelchair users and others at existing transport hubs and stations was raised. Officers stated that accessibility is a core aspect of the plan, with upgrades scheduled for all current stations to comply with present standards, including improved access, level boarding, and facilities for disabled passengers. They also referred to the creation of an Oxfordshire stations action plan and indicated that accessibility improvements are part of planned station upgrades.

The Committee noted that it was open to the Cabinet member to make the amendments proposed by Mr Maynard and **AGREED** to recommendations under the following headings:

- That the Council should undertake sufficient work to identify options and feasibility for mass rapid transit solutions for West Oxfordshire in time to allow that information to be used meaningfully and to be incorporated into the West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2043.
- That the Council should identify the areas of opportunity for development of housing near railway lines and the steps it intends to take to enable delivery as part of the Plan.
- That the Council should include maps within the OxRail 2040 Plan to illustrate the potential of an integrated transport network by overlaying major bus routes onto projected rail maps.
- That the Council works with the local City and District Councils to identify suitable locations for land to be allocated to the infrastructure required to support greater modal shift towards railway freight.
- That the Council should clarify within the Plan where primary responsibility for the key deliverables sits, what the Council's involvement is, the dependencies on which they rest, and an assessment of likely timescales.

13/25 INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING STATEMENT 2024/25 AND S106 IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME UPDATE

(Agenda No. 9)

The Committee welcomed Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Place, Environment and Climate Action, to present the report as well as Robin Rogers,

Director of Economy and Place, and Ian Dyson, Director of Financial and Commercial Services, to answer the Committee's questions.

Cllr Roberts briefly introduced the Infrastructure Funding Statement and Section 106 report by explaining that it was a retrospective statutory report required for government and also included a section detailing progress made as a result of scrutiny over the past 18 months. They emphasised that significant strides had been made, both in fulfilling statutory obligations and in improving work prompted by committee input.

The Committee raised the following concerns and questions:

- When asked if the council had learnt from other local authorities on managing and spending Section 106 funds, it was explained that the Planning Advisory Service had conducted a benchmarking review of Oxfordshire, offering recommendations. The challenges faced were said to be widespread nationally, and Oxfordshire continued to learn from others. The Committee was told the review report could be circulated. It was clarified that a previous magazine article ranking Oxfordshire poorly was based only on funds collected, not on deliverability.
- It was clarified that the dashboard reflected only the baseline capital programme; spending from the accelerated pipeline funding approved in October had not yet been included in financial projections. Officers explained that factors such as housing completions and demographic changes impact when Section 106 funds are spent. Efforts were ongoing to enhance visibility of projected and actual spending by developing parallel tables for confirmed and anticipated projects, while governance changes are being made to accelerate delivery and improve clarity.
- The S106 system was described as complex, with funds often fragmented and bound to specific localities and projects, making spending difficult. It was highlighted that gathering enough funding for larger schemes was a challenge, and strict legal requirements must be met. The Council recognised that the report did not fully clarify these issues, and admitted the system was less than ideal. Efforts were underway to improve transparency and to speed up expenditure, aiming to address these challenges and to ensure more effective use of the contributions.
- Concerns were raised regarding delays in the allocation of S106 funds and a perceived lack of accountability for these postponements. The response acknowledged these frustrations and clarified that, although a dashboard was available to track disbursements, infrastructure initiatives naturally involved extended procedures such as design, consultation, and procurement. It was noted that the Council had strengthened its oversight and was systematically reviewing older projects to identify and address bottlenecks, with both the administration and officers being held accountable for progress. Additionally, the importance of member engagement in prioritising local projects was highlighted as a means to enhance accountability and responsiveness.

- The possibility of sharing the Section 106 dashboard with localities and planning committees to enhance oversight was discussed. It was clarified that members currently had access to the dashboard and could submit queries, and that expanding the scope of information available to localities was feasible. Nonetheless, it was acknowledged that certain confidentiality concerns may limit the sharing of specific information with district councils. The objective remained to maintain transparency, and ongoing efforts were focused on refining procedures and strengthening collaboration with districts, particularly in anticipation of Local Government Reorganisation.

ACTION: The Planning Advisory Service's report to be circulated to the Committee.

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

- That the Council should ensure that local members are engaged and involved with questions of funding in their divisions;
- That the Council should recognise the urgency of ensuring its processes are sufficient for timely spending of s.106 funds.

Committee adjourned at 11:38 and reconvened at 11:45.

14/25 UPDATE: MOVEMENT AND PLACE PLANS

(Agenda No. 10)

The Committee requested an update on the Movement and Place Plans, and invited Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Place, Environment, and Climate Action, to present the report and welcomed Hannah Battye, Head of Place Shaping, and Ashley Hayden, Transport Policy and Strategy Team Lead, to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet Member reported that the Movement and Place Plans were ongoing, building on the local transport connectivity plan. These documents were intended to detail completed projects, forthcoming funded schemes, and future priorities identified through community input. The Head of Place Shaping noted that these plans update the 2016 versions, were not yet finished, and would continue to be developed with input from communities to ensure appropriate measures are included. The Transport Policy and Strategy Team Lead explained that the plans were designed to be updated annually, with consultations currently taking place for the Science Vale and Bicester & Mid Cherwell areas, and mentioned scheduled public engagement events.

Members raised the following questions and queries:

- An inquiry was made regarding developments at Milton Park, emphasising its significant growth within the medical and biotech sectors, specifically whether the implementation of the Milton Park cycle path could be expedited in response to increased demand from new businesses and residential projects. Officers acknowledged that Milton Park's ongoing expansion was recognised, and it was noted that measures were being taken to accelerate the completion of the cycle routes. A dedicated individual was currently managing progress on the Milton Park cycle path, although certain outstanding issues still required resolution.

- It was argued that the boundaries proposed in the place plans did not accurately reflect local movement or character, with particular reference to areas such as Henley, Wallingford, and Wantage, where boundaries appeared either arbitrary or failed to encompass adjacent communities. In response, officers emphasised that the boundaries presented were merely initial proposals. They assured the Committee that these would be thoroughly reviewed and refined through collaboration with colleagues and additional engagement, especially as the process advances towards formal consultation with stakeholders and local communities.
- The involvement of town and parish councils, along with other stakeholders, in the development of Movement and Place Plans was discussed. Officers outlined that the process involved initial engagement with town and parish councils, district members, and key stakeholders prior to formal consultation. It was noted that input from members had already shaped aspects of the plans, and that public engagement events were scheduled to take place at community locations. It was also proposed that workshops or interactive sessions with parish and town councils could facilitate their participation from the start and promote broader community involvement.

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

- That the Council should review the proposed geographical boundaries for the Place plans to ensure they pass the 'sense check'
- That the Council should engage proactively with parish and town councils to ensure that local needs are understood
- That the Council should engage proactively with local members to ensure that local needs are understood

15/25 OXFORDSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE IMPROVEMENT (Agenda No. 11)

The Committee requested an update on the Fire and Rescue Improvement Programme, and invited Cllr Jenny Hannaby, Cabinet member for Community Safety, to present the report and Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet Member introduced the fire and rescue service improvement item by noting the report provided an update on progress addressing areas for improvement identified in the latest inspection, highlighting that six critical areas had been addressed and emphasising the success of the dynamic improvement pipeline and the Fire Improvement Board. The Chief Fire Officer added that 26 areas for improvement had been identified, with six completed, and explained the importance of fire survival guidance, the structure of the improvement programme, and the involvement of the inspectorate liaison officer to ensure progress and oversight.

The Chief Fire Officer clarified that the inspection took place in January, but the report was not published until July, explaining an apparent discrepancy in the scrutiny report.

The Committee raised the following questions:

- The Committee enquired about staff morale in the fire service amid proposed changes and the potential for a greater role for cadets. The Chief Fire Officer explained that morale was monitored via surveys and ongoing staff engagement, acknowledging that consultations regarding changes had had some impact. He highlighted the value of cadets, noting six active units across the county, and stressed their positive role in youth engagement and community support. However, expansion of the cadet programme depended on resources and the availability of volunteers.
- How were the fire and rescue service addressing plans for retirements and recruitment, including succession planning. The Chief Fire Officer stated that succession and workforce planning were ongoing areas of attention, with an establishment board that regularly reviewed retirements, staff turnover, and recruitment requirements. Succession planning was identified as an area for improvement in the inspection report and was being addressed.
- The procedures regarding how the fire and rescue service monitored response times, as well as the handling of exceptions such as instances where response times exceed targets, were addressed. It was clarified that response times were tracked through the Council's monthly business monitoring report, with defined targets established for attending calls within set timeframes. Any responses exceeding 14 minutes were subject to investigation, and this data was published in the annual performance report, which was subsequently presented to the committee for review.
- The Committee enquired about the expected timeline for completing the identified areas for improvement and the safety outcomes, particularly those related to the fire cover model. The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that the areas for improvement currently on hold were anticipated to be completed within this financial year, with all issues resolved prior to the next inspection. The fire cover model was clarified as a means of enhancing service delivery and implementing key safety measures identified by the inspectorate, rather than a cost-saving initiative. The Committee was to receive further detailed updates on these developments in due course.

The Committee adjourned for lunch at 12:30 and reconvened at 14:00.

Cllr Gordon left the meeting at this stage.

16/25 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION - ONE OXFORDSHIRE PROPOSAL
(Agenda No. 12)

The Committee requested a report on the Council's proposal for Local Government Reorganisation before it was considered by Cabinet on 13 November. The Committee invited Cllr Liz Leffman, the Leader of the Council, to present the report and welcomed Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer (Deputy Chief Executive), Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and

Monitoring Officer, Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, Helen Mitchell, Programme Director: Local Government Reorganisation, Robin Rogers, Director of Environment and Place, and Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships, answer the Committee's questions.

The Leader of the Council introduced Local Government Reorganisation, outlining three proposals for submission: a single unitary authority from the County Council, plus two- and three-unitary options from districts and the city. She urged a focus on making the strongest case for a single unitary, particularly regarding service integration, councillor numbers, and the impact on key services such as adult social care, children's services, and transport. Comments were invited to shape the final proposal.

The Programme Director explained that three options for Local Government Reorganisation had been developed, following a statutory invitation for reform. Engagement with the public and partners focused on refining the proposals, emphasising simplicity, minimal disruption, and the importance of strong local governance, particularly the role of town and parish councils. The rationale for a single Oxfordshire-wide authority included historical continuity, integrated services, and efficient transition without fragmenting existing provision. The Programme Director highlighted aims to build on best practice and enhance service delivery, especially in homelessness and housing.

The Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer presented the financial aspects of Local Government Reorganisation, noting that PwC's independent evaluation showed guaranteed savings from reorganisation and additional, less certain savings from transformation. She stressed that the single Oxfordshire authority was deemed the most financially resilient and lowest risk, according to the Financial Resilience Index, particularly given likely funding cuts under the Fair Funding Review. She further explained that adopting a single unitary model would lead to minimal changes in council tax levels, making it a more stable option compared to the two- or three-unitary proposals.

The Chair opened up the discussion to Members inviting comments and questions on the One Oxfordshire Proposal.

- During the discussion on local government reorganisation, a councillor enquired about the future management of Oxford City Council's council homes, raising concerns about housing debt and the potential impact of a single unitary authority on council housing. Officers explained that all council tenants would be securely transferred to the new authority, which would also inherit the existing expertise and skills in housing management. The Executive Director clarified that the housing debt was asset-backed and would be treated separately from general debt, and emphasised that any decisions regarding the future structure or management of council housing would be made by the new authority, not predetermined in the current proposal.
- A councillor inquired about the implications for West Berkshire if it were not part of the One Oxfordshire proposal and raised questions regarding the possible size of a single Oxfordshire unitary authority. Officers responded that West Berkshire was

already a unitary authority and would not be affected, stating that including West Berkshire could be disruptive and was not viewed as advantageous for Oxfordshire residents. Officers also addressed concerns about size by noting that, although One Oxfordshire would be large, other counties were considering unitaries of comparable or larger size, and government policy did not specify an upper population limit.

- A councillor raised concerns regarding Oxfordshire's level of representation within a prospective Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), questioning whether a transition to a single unitary authority could potentially diminish Oxfordshire's influence compared to the current arrangement of multiple authorities. In response, the Leader clarified that the governance framework for the MSA remained under consideration but emphasised that a unified Oxfordshire authority could offer a consolidated and influential voice. The Leader, and Officers, further explained that representation on the MSA cabinet would be subject to negotiation amongst all participating authorities, and it remained feasible for Oxfordshire to have multiple representatives based on the eventual governance structure.
- Members asked what powers area committees would have under the One Oxfordshire proposal, stressing the importance of these committees having meaningful authority rather than being mere discussion fora. Officers replied that the proposal included a strong focus on area committees, with an expectation that they would have decision-making powers and budgets. The Programme Director stated that the exact functions and powers would be developed further, likely including responsibilities over local services such as leisure, and that further work and consultation would shape the final arrangements.
- A councillor expressed concern that, with the formation of a new authority, there could be a considerable loss of experience and organisational memory if staff opted for early retirement or voluntary redundancy during the transition. Officers acknowledged this was a risk, noting that such changes often prompted staff to leave. Officers emphasised the importance of fostering a positive and attractive organisational culture to encourage staff to remain for at least a few years whilst the new authority was established. Additionally, Officers described practical steps being taken, such as arranging training sessions and knowledge-sharing opportunities between staff from different councils, to help retain expertise and ensure a smoother transition.
- Members raised concerns about the future of the fire and rescue service if Oxfordshire were to move away from a single unitary authority towards two or more councils. The question focused on whether the service would need to be disaggregated and what the implications would be. The Chief Fire Officer responded that, in such a case, the fire and rescue service would have to be separated from the county council and reconstituted as a combined fire authority, as seen in Berkshire, where multiple unitaries share a single fire service. It was highlighted that this would require establishing a new governance structure with elected members from each council, incurring significant upfront costs and operational complexities. Officers also pointed out that this arrangement might only be temporary if a mayoral combined authority was introduced soon afterwards, making the process potentially inefficient and disruptive.

Cllr Kerr left the meeting at this stage.

- Members questioned how democratic responsibility would be maintained under the One Oxfordshire proposal, particularly as the number of councillors would decrease and wards would become larger, potentially reducing local representation in rural areas. Officers recognised these concerns, stating that a boundary review would determine new divisions based on government guidance and population, following the vesting day of the new authority. Officers also noted that area committees were intended to bolster local accountability and resident engagement but acknowledged the challenge of balancing effective local democracy with national requirements and the need for efficiency in governance.
- Members enquired about how parish and town councils might be affected by local government reorganisation, particularly regarding increased responsibilities. Officers responded that while many parishes were interested in managing more local services, their capacity varied greatly. The proposal intends to collaborate with parishes, enabling those willing and able to take on extra duties, but without placing undue pressure on smaller councils. Officers emphasised that any transfer of responsibilities must be managed carefully to prevent the emergence of a two-tier system and to ensure good value for taxpayers.
- The discussion turned to how a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire could better manage local government funding cuts, especially with anticipated reductions from the fair funding review. Officers explained that a single authority, with a wider tax base and greater financial resilience, would be better placed to allocate resources and meet needs across the county. In contrast, smaller authorities might struggle if high-need areas lacked sufficient local funding, making a single authority a more sustainable option in an uncertain funding environment.
- Members expressed concern that the proposal lacked specifics on managing local services like waste, grounds maintenance, and playground repairs, as well as omitting net zero ambitions. Officers responded that some local services could be better delivered by capable town and parish councils but emphasised that not all would wish or be able to take on extra duties. On net zero, officers acknowledged it was not fully covered in the proposal but pointed to existing green financing and pledged to integrate net zero objectives into future plans for the new authority.

The Director of Economy and Place left the meeting at this stage.

- Members questioned how stakeholder concerns and feedback had been reflected in the local government reorganisation proposal, noting that the summary of stakeholder views appeared limited and that many stakeholders, including employees, councillors, MPs, and public sector providers, had expressed worries about the proposed authority being too large and distant. Officers acknowledged these concerns, stating that feedback about the potential size and remoteness of the new council had been candidly included in the proposal. They clarified that while some stakeholders had raised issues about scale, others had been positive

about the single unitary model, and they agreed to refine the stakeholder feedback section for greater clarity.

- Concerns were raised about the inconsistencies in the financial analysis presented across the three local government reorganisation proposals, highlighting that the numbers and methodologies varied significantly and could confuse or undermine public trust in the process. The Executive Director responded by clarifying that both the single unitary and two unitary proposals had commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to conduct independent evaluations of potential savings, using a consistent methodology to allow for direct comparison between those two options. In contrast, the three unitary proposal had not used the same PwC approach, which meant its figures were not directly comparable. The Executive Director further explained that the financial analysis distinguished between savings from reorganisation, which were considered guaranteed and of primary interest to government, and additional transformation savings, which would depend on the future authority's willingness and capacity to pursue further efficiencies.
- The establishment of local area committees as part of the reorganisation raised questions about whether this would introduce additional administrative layers, increase the number of officers, meetings, and costs, and potentially create inconsistencies in decision-making across areas. Officers noted these points and clarified that area committees were required under each of the three government proposals. They stated that the aim was for these committees to have defined powers and budgets rather than serving as discussion fora, and indicated that further planning would be necessary to ensure effectiveness, accountability, and to minimise overlap or confusion.
- During the discussion, one Member recounted persistent issues with the County Council, specifically the slow response times from officers compared to district council officers. The Member described how, in practice, district officers often replied within hours, while county responses could take days or weeks, and noted the recent introduction of a councillor enquiries form as evidence that the county was struggling to handle the volume of requests. Officers acknowledged these concerns, confirming that responsiveness had been a common theme in feedback from both Members and stakeholders. They assured the Committee that improving response times and overall service to members would be a key focus in the design of any new authority, aiming to create a more efficient and accessible organisation for councillors and residents alike.

Cllr Ley left the meeting at this stage

- Concerns were raised about the Council's engagement, with criticism focused on the quality of communications and the digital campaign, which, despite reaching 284,000 people, was seen as less effective than district councils' more visible efforts like banners and roadshows. Officers acknowledged that their strategy prioritised factual awareness over active promotion of the Council's proposal and accepted that engagement had been lacking. They agreed to make future engagement, particularly during the statutory consultation, more engaging and accessible to residents.

- Members asked what the role of Council and of the Committee would be during the statutory consultation period for local government reorganisation. Officers responded that the County Council would act as both a statutory consultee and a promoter, providing its views on all proposals under consultation. They anticipated that the Committee would contribute by drafting or discussing the Council's response, which would then be considered through the council's governance processes, such as Cabinet or Scrutiny, before submission. It was clarified that the final decision on the consultation response would likely remain an executive function but the Leader noted her willingness for Full Council to give its view during the consultation.

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

- That the Council should ensure that future public communications regarding Local Government Reorganisation are engaging, accessible, and interesting.
- That the Council should give greater attention to neighbourhood governance, and particularly to Area Committees, within its submission to Government.
- That the Council should ensure that Full Council is given the opportunity to express its view on Local Government Reorganisation during the statutory consultation.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing