

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 9 September 2025

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Committee members present:

Councillor Powell (Chair)	Councillor Rowley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Altaf-Khan	Councillor Azad
Councillor Corais	Councillor Latif
Councillor Miles	Councillor Muddiman (Substitute)
Councillor Mundy	Councillor Ottino
Councillor Yeatman (Substitute)	

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Tom Hook, Deputy Chief Executive - Citizen and City Services
Jiajia Miao, Corporate Consultation Officer
Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor
Hannah Carmody-Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer

Also present:

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Jarvis, Qayyum and Stares sent apologies.
Substitutes are shown above.

32. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

Councillor Rowley joined the meeting.

33. Chair's Announcements

The Chair announced that there had been a change to the scheduled special meeting of the Committee to discuss the Local Government Reorganisation proposal. To facilitate more time for Members to review the papers, the meeting would now take place on Wednesday 5th November.

34. Minutes of the previous meeting

The Committee resolved to **approve** the minutes of the meeting held on 5 August 2025 as a true and accurate record.

The Committee resolved to **approve** the confidential minutes of the meeting held on 5 August 2025 as a true and accurate record.

35. Addresses by members of the public

None.

36. Councillor addresses on any item for discussion on the Scrutiny agenda

None.

37. Citizen and Community Engagement Policy 2025

Cabinet, at its meeting on 17 September 2025, will consider a report to seek approval to adopt the Citizen and Community Engagement Policy 2025.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies, Tom Hook, Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens' Services, and Jiajia Miao, Corporate Consultation Officer, who were present to respond to questions.

Councillor Chapman presented the report and thanked the officers present for their committed work on the policy. The Committee heard that the policy focuses on understanding the views, needs, and priorities of citizens in order to support the Council's delivery of good services with feedback incorporated to ensure accountability. Councillor Chapman summarised the context which has informed the report's findings and noted that the policy focuses on transparency, flexibility, proportionality, inclusivity, and timeliness of feedback. The Committee understood that varied approaches were utilised to gather and manage information. Although the policy is not a statutory obligation, the Council deems it a necessity and has taken inspiration from best practice methods detailed by the LGA and Cabinet Office. Councillor Chapman also summarised changes since the previous iteration of the policy, including the Social Housing Act, which has added new obligations for councils in relation to tenant engagement and rights protection. The Committee understood that a consultation took place which received 197 responses and demonstrated broad support for the approach taken within the policy. Councillor Chapman noted that some concerns from residents regarding the timeliness of responses, trust, and communication. Officers have since worked to strengthen the policy around these aspects to ensure that residents views are taken seriously. Finally, Councillor Chapman explained that the Scrutiny Committee's feedback to Cabinet had also been incorporated into the updated policy.

The Chair invited questions from the Committee.

Councillor Altaf-Khan commented that he considered 200 consultation responses to be poor from such a populated area such as Oxford. It was asked what is being done to engage youth and minority community groups.

Councillor Miles noted that the Scrutiny Committee had previously provided feedback on ensuring inclusive engagement by considering different languages, and therefore asked how resource allocation is determined for this provision.

Councillor Mundy joined the meeting.

In response to Councillor Altaf-Khan, Councillor Chapman explained that many consultations receive far fewer than 200 responses but noted that more would always be welcomed. It was explained that the content of the responses was consistent and helpful.

The Corporate Consultation Officer, in response to concerns regarding consultation response numbers, commented that the relevant documents had also been taken to service areas for feedback via the localities team. In relation to ethnic minority groups, it was explained that many efforts are made to reach these groups, but it has remained the case that most responses come from affluent residents. The Committee understood that challenges remain in reaching younger generations. The Committee heard that 1000 residents have signed up to the Residents Panel which will help to support the representation of more voices from across Oxford, however more involvement of students and ethnic minority groups is still desired. The Corporate Consultation Officer explained that demographic monitoring is ongoing to ensure better representation and inclusion, and data from the residents' survey also brings in voices of minority groups. In relation to the Youth Voice Panel, it was explained that this policy is focused on an overarching approach for engagement and the panel is run separately by the localities team.

Councillor Latif and Councillor Corais joined the meeting.

The Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens' Services explained that the Council's language interpretation service is supported by data from equality impact assessments which help to inform engagement approaches from the start of a process by identifying groups that may need support. The Committee also heard of the social media approaches that the Council takes outside of traditional communication methods, including Tik Tok videos, which receive strong engagement. Finally, the Committee heard that the localities team and external organisations also support other methods of linking in with less represented communities.

The Chair invited further questions from the Committee.

Councillor Rowley emphasised the importance of consulting younger members of society through schools. It was asked whether any thought had been given to using schools as location for engaging with more adults also they are often locations which invite diverse populations to gather. It was suggested that this could tackle some of the affluence bias in the consultation results.

Councillor Muddiman commended the policy but noted concerns relating to how it will be implemented. The Committee heard an example of an in-person engagement session to support public engagement with the Council's Local Plan which was not accessible. Councillor Muddiman emphasised that complicated policy documents must be communicated in a manner which encourages the public to engage and enables

accessibility. It was also noted that consultations should be avoided during the summer and Christmas holiday periods.

Councillor Ottino asked how the Council can change the perception of many residents that their voices are not listened to when responding to consultations. It was also asked whether there are examples from other Councils which show how this is done, and finally, whether the Council is actively seeking to attend community locations to engage with minority groups and to raise awareness of the presence of consultations.

Councillor Chapman welcomed Councillor Rowley's recommendation of attending school locations to encourage broader participation in consultations. The Committee were also reminded of the ability to promote consultations via ward newsletters. Councillor Muddiman's concerns were acknowledged and the need to improve in-person engagement sessions was noted alongside the preference to avoid consultations at certain points of the year. Finally, Councillor Chapman supported the need for residents to feel that their voices are heard, however commented that not all responsibilities lie with Oxford City Council and reasonable communication must be made to make clear to the community where difference local responsibilities lie so that their thoughts can be directed and appreciated effectively.

Councillor Yeatman joined the meeting.

The Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens' Services, in response to the consultation response numbers, noted that various topics attract various scales of response but noted that positive improvement is now evident in how the Council engages with tenants. Councillor Muddiman's suggestion regarding times of the year to avoid consultation was also noted and the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens' Services committed to feeding back her illustration of the engagement session linked to the Local Plan.

The Chair invited further questions from the Committee.

Councillor Altaf-Khan noted his dissatisfaction with the answers provided in relation to engagement with minority communities, noting it as a long-term issue. The Committee heard of the importance of going into communities and speaking to people directly. It was also suggested that innovative ways of doing this need to be sought, and councillors should be utilised to distribute information on consultations via newsletters and noticeboards. This would support those who do not find online resources to be accessible. Councillor Altaf-Khan also recommended that officers seek examples of how other councils approach engagement and consultation with diverse communities.

Councillor Miles observed from the consultation responses that many of the matters raised do not relate to responsibilities of the City Council and therefore suggested that work be undertaken to more clearly communicate to residents which Council their concerns are best raised with, alongside how the Council operates. It was noted that this could support the diverse and incoming populations in Oxford who may not have an inherent contextual understanding of local governance and could therefore alleviate some disillusionment and misunderstanding. Secondly, Councillor Miles recommended that the format and length of language in the consultations be considered to ensure accessibility and understanding from those who are not as comfortable with reading and writing. It was suggested that this may support accessibility for some minority groups, such as older women. Lastly, it was noted that there are often difficulties with accessing and utilising local noticeboards.

The Chair agreed that residents often experience confusion in understanding the difference between City Council and County Council responsibilities and therefore also recommended increased communication to remedy this. The Chair then asked in what ways the Council is assessing how disabled residents are properly engaged in consultation, and what can be done to fill the gap noted in the report. Lastly, the Chair supported Councillor Miles' comments on the difficulty in accessing local noticeboards.

Councillor Chapman appreciated the points raised about public confusion between City and County Council responsibilities but noted that the consultations this Council circulates are always focused on its own responsibilities and it does not consult on behalf of the County Council. In response to concerns regarding ethnic minority group engagement, Councillor Chapman referred to the work of the Residents Panel and the balanced sample of the city that it offers. In relation to locality officers attending community centres, it was confirmed that this occurs on a weekly basis and is used as an avenue for feedback. The Committee heard that further consideration could go into formalising this. Councillor Miles' concerns around language and text accessibility were appreciated. Finally, in relation to noticeboards, Councillor Chapman noted no personal experience with issues and commented on the regular use of them in his ward. In agreement with Councillor Altaf-Khan, Councillor Chapman also endorsed the value of local public meetings as a form of effective engagement with residents.

In relation to the inclusion of disabled residents, the Corporate Consultation Officer explained that the Council collects demographic data at the end of each consultation which is analysed to ensure that any issues or information gaps are identified.

The Committee considered varied issues with access to, and use of, local noticeboards as means of improving local engagements. Members considered planning issue and funding channels.

Councillor Mundy asked how often incentives are used to encourage response rates to consultations and requested information on what impacts these have.

In response to concerns regarding noticeboards, Councillor Chapman recounted his experience of installing new noticeboards in his ward and distribution of local newsletters. It was recommended that concerns relating to noticeboards be suggested at the Council's next budget considerations.

In response to Councillor Mundy, the Corporate Consultation Officer explained that in the last three years incentives have only been used to support recruitment for the Residents' Panel. It was also clarified that incentives are not used for most public consultations as it is preferred that residents make decision without influence.

The Chair asked requested that officers support a communication to Members detailing the processes for using local noticeboards. The Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens' Services committed to taking this away.

The Chair invited the Committee to discuss possible recommendations.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendation(s) on the report to Cabinet:

- 1) That the Policy specifically assigns locality managers a role in the dissemination of consultations, making use of their deeper understanding of each local area's needs and dynamics with the intention to tailor engagement efforts more effectively.
- 2) That the Policy acknowledges and identifies busy time periods to be avoided for consultations, to ensure residents or participants have adequate opportunity to participate, particularly where the consultation topic requires more focused attention.
- 3) That every consultation document undergoes an inclusivity check by an officer, resident panel, or elected member prior to release for readability and understandability by all audiences.
- 4) That Cabinet ensures the Policy is applied in a manner that maximises the inclusion of disabled people in the Council's consultation processes.
- 5) That Cabinet requests officers to undertake exploratory work to incorporate a system for ranking the importance of each consultation, and to investigate whether the use of incentives could effectively increase participation and engagement.

The Chair thanked Councillor Chapman, the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens' Services, and the Corporate Consultation Officer.

Councillor Chapman, the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens' Services, and the Corporate Consultation Officer left the meeting.

38. Budget Review Group Scope

The Director of Law, Governance and Strategy has submitted a report outlining the Scope and Terms of Reference for the Budget Review Group, established by the Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 10 June 2025.

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor explained that every year the Council is required by legislation to follow a statutory process to set the budget, for which scrutiny is a critical component. The Budget Review Group will fulfil the scrutiny function, and the report outlines the scope of this alongside the group's terms of reference. The Committee understood that the group will meet 5 times between December 2025 and January 2026 to thematically consider the budget of each directorate and the Council's financial assets. The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor outlined the proposed areas for discussion, as noted in the report, and clarified that the group's recommendations would be submitted to the main Committee for approval before being passed to Cabinet and full Council.

The Chair invited any questions or comments from the Committee.

The Chair, in relation to the scope of the Budget Review Group, noted reference to maximising savings from AI and the use of digital technology in the report. It was asked whether the report could be amended to explicitly state that the group will consider savings *and* costs to ensure that anything the Council chooses to do when incorporating AI will be cost bearing, as well as cost saving. The Chair noted that this would appreciate the experimental nature of this technology.

The Chair proposed the minor amendment; Councillor Latif seconded. The Committee unanimously voted in favour.

Councillor Miles emphasised the issue of the Council's Environmental Health receiving decreasing budget, despite increasing pressures and recognising the Council's statutory responsibilities. It was proposed that this be highlighted as a specific focus area during the budget review. The Chair suggested this be inserted into the scope.

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor confirmed that both amendments could be made to the scope of the Budget Review Group.

Councillor Ottino raised concern that Councillor Miles' suggestion exceeded the intended broad nature of the scope outlined in the report, to which the Chair noted that the additions could provide some specific remit alongside the broad scope.

Councillor Miles and Councillor Ottino discussed the requirement to mention statutory responsibilities within the scope. The Chair suggested that the scope be amended to include consideration of the impact of discretionary spend on statutory responsibilities, for which environmental health would be an example.

Councillor Miles proposed the amendment; Councillor Ottino seconded. The Committee unanimously voted in favour.

The Committee resolved to:

1. **Approve** the Scope for the 2026-27 Budget Review Group as amended.

The Chair proposed, and Councillor Mundy seconded this. The Committee unanimously voted in favour.

2. **Approve** the Terms of Reference for the Budget Review Group

The Chair proposed, and Councillor Miles seconded this. The Committee unanimously voted in favour.

3. **Delegate** authority to the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor, in consultation with the Scrutiny Chair and Budget Review Group Chair, to amend the scope as needed.

The Chair proposed, and Councillor Rowley seconded this. The Committee unanimously voted in favour.

39. Scrutiny Work Plan

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor provided an update and summarised the items that the Committee will consider at the next meeting, as noted in the agenda. The Committee also heard a summary of the reports it had requested relating to climate topics which are scheduled for consideration in early 2026, as noted within the agenda. The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor also reminded the Committee that a special meeting is being convened on 5 November 2025 to consider Local Government Reorganisation proposals.

The Chair proposed one amendment to the work plan by suggesting that the item relating to litter and the environment be brought to the main Committee, rather than a working group, given the broader implications of the topic. The Committee agreed.

The Committee **agreed** the work plan.

40. Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations

The Chair noted his attendance at the meeting of Cabinet on 13 August and outlined the 6 recommendations that were presented from the Scrutiny Committee. Members understood that of these, three were agreed in full, and three were agreed in part. The Chair detailed Cabinet's responses to each recommendation, as outlined in the report.

The Committee **noted** Cabinet's responses to its recommendation.

41. Endorsement of Recommendations from Working Groups

The Chair invited members of the working groups to reflect on any recommendations made since the last meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor summarised the recommendations made by the Housing and Homeless Working Group on 2 September, noting that four items were considered, and the full recommendations were noted in the report.

Councillor Miles presented the recommendations made by the Climate and Environment Working Group and noted the matters discussed, as set out in the report.

Councillor Ottino asked whether the Climate and Environment Working Group had considered the Council's relationship with the heat network providers given that it will sit under roads, and highways are not a responsibility of the City Council. It was asked how Oxford City Council are expected to influence the project and its outcomes. Councillor Miles detailed the partnership model that is taking shape to include the off-takers of the network in the city, including Oxford City Council. Councillor Muddiman, who was also present at the meeting of the working group, outlined the public ownership of the infrastructure and the financial agreement which is being reached between the partners and contractor. It was emphasised that there is a desire to avoid the monopolisation of the project and its infrastructure. Councillor Miles provided further details around the progress of securing funding partners for the project.

Councillor Ottino asked how it could be ensured that the Council is listened to. It was recommended that the relevant information in response to these concerns was covered in the slide deck presented to the Working Group and endeavoured to share this with members of this Committee.

Councillor Latif left the meeting and did not return.

The Committee **endorsed** the recommendations from Working Groups.

42. Dates of future meetings

The Committee **noted** the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6:00 pm and ended at 7:40 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 14 October 2025

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Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired
Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal
decision notice is issued
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