

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 3 February 2026

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Committee members present:

Councillor Powell (Chair)	Councillor Rowley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Azad	Councillor Corais
Councillor Jarvis	Councillor Miles
Councillor Ottino	Councillor Qayyum
Councillor Stares	Councillor Taylor

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor
Hannah Carmody-Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer
Helen Bishop, Director of Communities & Citizens
Tom Hook, Deputy Chief Executive - Citizen and City Services
Nigel Kennedy, Group Director Finance
Phil McGaskill, Revenues Manager
Becky Willis, Programme Manager - People Programme Manager

Also present:

Councillor Ed Turner, Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management
Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focussed Services and Council Companies

Apologies:

No apologies were received.

It was noted that Councillor Taylor would be arriving late.

93. Declarations of interest

None.

94. Chair's Announcements

The Chair reminded Members to indicate whether they wished to discuss the exempt appendix relating to item 10; if so, the Committee would be required to enter confidential session, and the public would be excluded.

The Chair also welcomed Councillor Taylor to the Committee following his appointment at the last meeting of full Council.

95. Minutes of the previous meeting

The Committee resolved to **approve** the minutes of the meetings held 13 January 2026 as a true and accurate record.

96. Addresses by members of the public

None.

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

None.

98. Debt Recovery Procedure

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 14 October 2025, the Committee requested an update on the council's debt recovery procedure. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management, the Group Finance Director and the Revenues Service Delivery Manager were present to respond to questions.

The Revenues Service Delivery Manager introduced the report, noting that the Committee had queried the Council's use of enforcement agents, the steps taken to identify and support people experiencing temporary or permanent vulnerabilities, and the routes taken to recover outstanding debt. The report set out this information with explanation of the Council's legal obligations.

Councillor Turner welcomed the Committee's interest in the topic and emphasised the importance that the Council places on supporting people who are financially marginalised or vulnerable. Specific mention was made to the Council's use of grant funding, its commitment to council tax reduction, and the various advice and support services made available to citizens.

Councillor Ottino queried what the Council does to support those on universal credit with council tax payments, and whether any reductions are offered.

The Revenues Service Delivery Manager outlined the Council's use of MARS software to assess council tax for those residents in receipt of universal credit. The Committee heard that this enables better understanding of the impact of payment timings in order to inform recovery action and it considers personal circumstances of vulnerable persons to ensure appropriate support can be offered.

Councillor Turner also emphasised the need to carefully consider how to highlight a person's vulnerabilities to the Council to ensure they can receive appropriate support. Reference was made to the complexity of legal wording required in debt recovery communications and the Council's work with a behavioural psychologist to encourage better engagement.

Councillor Taylor and Councillor Qayyum joined the meeting during discussion of this item.

Councillor Ottino also queried how often the Council meets with relevant advice centres, to which Councillor Turner noted the Council's openness and officer attendance at advice centre AGMs. The Committee heard of capacity issues within advice centres which has limited the frequency of these meetings.

The Revenues Service Delivery Manager further explained that the Council used to hold quarterly meetings with advice centres, however capacity issues and volunteer availability has reduced these.

Councillor Turner left the meeting during discussion of this item.

Councillor Qayyum queried the accessibility of the complaints process for vulnerable residents and asked how the Council approaches and manages language barriers and digital exclusion during the debt recovery process.

Councillor Miles asked what steps the Council takes to confirm the identity of a person believed to be residing at a given property when enacting debt recovery measures.

Councillor Jarvis, in relation to paragraph 7 of the report, queried what incentives enforcement agents may perceive to be available, and whether they are required to report any new vulnerabilities of citizens to the Council. Councillor Jarvis also asked how frequently debt recovery cases are referred to an enforcement agency.

In response to Councillor Miles, the Revenues Service Delivery Manager explained the legislative requirements which the council are subject to when serving documents to a person's last known address; the process for this was outlined in detail. In response to Councillor Jarvis, the Revenues Service Delivery Manager noted that the Council meets with its contracted enforcement agencies on

a quarterly basis and pursues a vigorous process of aligning recovery to the council's policies, therefore expectations are placed on the companies to report vulnerabilities. In relation to possible incentives of bailiffs, their fees are covered by legislation and therefore no percentage of incentive is available to recover on the debts collected. The Committee also heard that if dissatisfied with the agency, the Council can assign work to their other provider. In response to Councillor Qayyum, it was noted that each enforcement agent wears body worn cameras which enables complaints to be assessed with evidence; around 1250 complaints are received monthly and are dealt with via the Council's complaints mechanism.

In regards language provisions during enforcement and debt recovery processes, and the frequency of debt recovery cases being referred to enforcement agencies, the Revenues Service Delivery Manager committed to reporting back. The Committee also heard of some of the more informal and plain language methods of communication used to contact residents including text messages, alongside formal legal correspondence.

Councillor Stares queried how confident the Council is that necessary and appropriate communication occurs with residents before enforcement takes place.

Councillor Rowley asked whether the Council receives any communications regarding debt recovery from the public that may have been generated via AI tools and is not accurate; what steps are taken to respond appropriately.

The Chair firstly requested a summary of the timeline between first contact and enforcement action taking place and then queried whether there is scope to add plain language wording as a supplement to the written communications sent to residents to ensure ease of understanding for all recipients.

The Revenues Service Delivery Manager provided a comprehensive step-by-step overview of the stages to the debt recovery process from first contact to completion of debt collection or payment. In response to Councillor Rowley, it was noted that any correspondence from residents would be responded to with a justification of why an amount is due to be paid and legislation would be used to support this reasoning.

The Chair invited the Committee to consider possible recommendations.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet:

- That a summary report on council debt recovery activities at all stages is provided to Scrutiny and Cabinet at a future meeting to ensure there is awareness in this area of the council's work.

- That Cabinet considers incorporating clear, plain language summary within letters issued to individuals in addition to links to further information online, given the prevalence of digital exclusion and unfamiliarity with local government terminology. This would reduce reliance on residents needing to follow online links to understand the purpose and implications of the letters.
- That the timescales of meetings with advice centres is revisited to ensure they correspond to their capacity and availability, noting that critical role of advice centres as both a key contact point for residents and a source of specialist advice and support.

The Chair thanked the officers.

The Group Finance Director and the Revenues Service Delivery Manager left the meeting.

99. Noticeboards Update

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 9 September 2025, the Committee requested an update on the Council owned noticeboards. The Cabinet Member for Citizen Focussed Services and Council Companies, the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens, and the Director of Communities and Citizens' Services were present to respond to questions.

Councillor Chapman introduced the update report by noting its connection to the Citizen Engagement Strategy. The Committee heard that the report takes a practical approach to assessing the variable maintenance situations and uses of noticeboards across the city and suggests how they can be used most effectively in the future. The Committee were asked to consider the proposals within the report.

The Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens reiterated that the report reflects a mixed picture across city and contained options for the Committee to consider.

Councillor Miles noted her thanks for the report and expressed a preference for valuable work with noticeboards to be maintained within the city. On this basis, it was asked what the procurement procedure and funding sources would be, and whether this could be standardised. Councillor Miles suggested that the Committee could consider the allocation of free space on noticeboards to allow residents to post their own leaflets, without the control the relevant organising body. Finally, it was asked how new locations for more noticeboards could be identified.

Councillor Taylor queried whether the Council had considered engaging with shops and small businesses to put noticeboards within their premises.

Councillor Chapman recommended that the most efficient provider for noticeboards is ODS, and the Committee heard of his experience with the installation and costs of this. It was noted that this could provide consistency across the city, as suggested by Councillor Miles. Councillor Chapman suggested that ODS be used in place of multiple varied suppliers. In respect of key control, Councillor Chapman noted strengths and weaknesses to centralised control of noticeboards and recommended that the Committee consider this.

The Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens Services clarified that the noticeboard costings included within the report were on the basis of ODS undertaking the work.

Councillor Qayyum expressed her view that the Council should be involved in the provision and management of noticeboards around the city.

Councillor Ottino queried what permissions are needed to put up a new noticeboard and requested that relevant guidelines for councillors be made available.

Councillor Chapman and the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens explained that formal planning permission is not usually required, but in some instances, the permission of the landowner may be necessary; this should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Councillor Miles noted concern and her experience with planning permission disputes relating to noticeboards and requested that councillors be provided with some definitive guidance.

The Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens suggested that the Committee may wish to make this as a recommendation, with consideration for the budget review group report later in the meeting.

The Chair invited the Committee to consider possible recommendations.

The Committee resolved to add to the recommendations of the Budget Review Group:

- To proceed with Option 3 (Continue with noticeboards, with City Council actively managing and operating the boards) as the preferred approach for the management and maintenance of community noticeboards costed at £75,000 one-off capital investment for the resurvey, installation, replacement or repair of noticeboards, and an annual budget of £35k for ongoing management and maintenance. In implementing this, existing arrangements led by parish councils or neighbourhood association should not be discouraged

nor discontinued. Should Option 3 not be achievable due to budgetary constraints, it is recommended that no further action is taken (Option 1).

Further to this, the Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet:

- Subject to the agreement that the Council will commit to actively managing and operating the noticeboards as proposed in the budget review process, that clear guidelines are developed for the use of noticeboards, including how new items and updates are managed, and the responsibilities of key holders.

The Chair thanked the officers.

100.AI Strategy Update

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 1 July 2025, the Committee requested a review of the Council's AI Strategy. The Cabinet Member for Citizen Focussed Services and Council Companies, the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens, the Director of Communities and Citizens' Services, and the People Programme Manager were present to respond to questions.

Councillor Chapman introduced the report, noting that the strategy supplements the Council's existing AI policy. The Committee understood that the report outlined how the progression of AI use would be managed in the future with reference to clear principles and a governance framework. Councillor Chapman emphasised the challenges of AI as it rapidly evolves and the need to keep it continuously under review, but also the exciting opportunities it offers, including for current apprentices within the council and for wider organisational efficiency. The Committee were informed that these apprenticeships are being funded via a government levy. Councillor Chapman concluded by urging the Committee not to be too prescriptive in any recommendations put forward as to allow the productive development of AI with time.

The Director of Communities and Citizens' Services emphasised that the strategy seeks to curate a safe introduction for AI mechanisms within the organisation and to maintain a fair balance between safety and responsibility alongside creativity. The Committee learned of the steering groups which have been developed to assess and monitor the Council's expansion of AI.

Councillor Miles suggested an open question focused on whether security and GDPR had been considered within the Council's expansion of AI.

Councillor Corais queried the savings targets mentioned in the report, specifically how they had been set up and managed.

The Director of Communities and Citizens' Services, in response to Councillor Miles, emphasised that the Council manages AI within a highly secure environment, and the current policy ensures employees use tools that are confined within the Microsoft environment. This ensures that all organisational data remains within a compliant boundary and risk is naturally minimised; data and audit trails are also maintained. The Committee were assured that this is assessed by the steering groups which ensures compliance with necessary protocols. In response to Councillor Corais, the Director of Communities and Citizens' Services explained that no specific target has been set in relation to AI, instead the report references savings in relation to an existing target for transformation programmes. The Committee heard future assessments would determine whether efficiency savings could be made using AI.

The Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens also noted that the Council would assess future savings from AI and referenced some local authorities already doing so. It was emphasised that the savings would focus on how staff use AI tools, not the replacement of staff with AI.

The Chair noted that the strategy references making decisions about when ethical AI can be deployed and asked whether there is a process for making these decisions. Specifically, it was asked what areas AI may be allowed into, and what parameters this would be based on.

The People Programme Manager emphasised that the process is still being tested and refined through the steering group. In reference to Microsoft CoPilot, the Committee heard that monitoring is currently focused on how officers are using the tool to create and engage with AI agents and the protection and management of sensitive data within this. The People Programme Manager outlined other steering groups which also exist to monitor the application of AI in specific departments, and the process which these projects must complete before reaching the Organisation Change Board, chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens.

Councillor Qayyum asked whether CoPilot would be the only AI tool taken forward by the Council, or whether others are also being considered.

The People Programme Manager noted that all current trials within the organisation only use CoPilot. The Committee were assured that procurement guidelines are being reviewed to facilitate the rollout of other AI tools which considers factors such as environmental sustainability credentials.

The Chair asked whether there is a reporting process for AI related incidents, and whether examples of inaccurate or negative outcomes are recorded.

The People Programme Manager confirmed that relevant training is being developed and delivered to all staff on how to use AI tools safely, and some staff are asked to fill out logs to record learning and disadvantages. This allows issues to be reviewed.

Councillor Miles asked what the Council's approach to transcriptions through AI is, and how third-party tools can be managed from an operational perspective.

The People Programme Manager clarified that the question related more to the AI policy than strategy but summarised that transcription is permitted in line with consent guidance which applies to meeting attendees where AI is used; human checking still occurs even when AI transcription has been utilised. In relation to third-party add-ons, the Committee heard that a process is being developed with the IT team to stop this until authorisation has been confirmed by the organisation.

Councillor Taylor asked how the use of AI generated content on the Council's public website, for example, would be managed and viewed by the organisation.

Councillor Chapman emphasised that officers would remain responsible for any content they published using AI, and human checking would still be required to ensure organisational and individual accountability remains.

The Chair, in conversation with officers, confirmed there are currently no AI situations within the Council where there is no human responsible for checking output.

The Committee made no recommendations to Cabinet.

The Chair thanked the officers.

The Cabinet Member for Citizen Focussed Services and Council Companies, the Deputy Chief Executive for City and Citizens, and the Director of Communities and Citizens' Services left the meeting.

101. Budget Review Group Report

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor had submitted a report on behalf of the Chair of the Budget Review Group, following the Scrutiny Committee's agreement to establish a Budget Review Group at its meeting on 10 June 2025 and approval of the Terms of Reference and Scope at its meeting on 9 September 2025.

The Chair reminded the Committee to indicate if they wished to discuss the confidential appendix to the report for this item; they did not.

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor summarised the report, noting that the Budget Review Group had met through December and January to examine the Council's proposed budget and medium-term financial plan. The Committee were informed that nine recommendations were produced, as detailed in the report.

Councillor Jarvis expressed his thanks to members of other working groups which had participated in the discussions and noted that the group had fewer recommendations than previous years, partially due to the nature of the financial plan and expected changes with Local Government Reorganisation. Councillor Jarvis also thanked Councillor Fry as the Chair of the budget review group, and the Group Finance Director.

The Chair noted that the Committee's earlier recommendation relating to noticeboards would be formally appended to this report.

Councillor Miles noted her thanks and support for the recommendations but suggested that all those who had contributed the budget review group discussion be referenced within the report in the future. Councillor Jarvis supported this and requested that the report be amended to reflect this acknowledgement. There being no dissent, the Committee supported this amendment.

Councillor Taylor expressed his discontent with recommendation 4.

The Chair explained that detailed reasoning for the recommendation could not be provided during this meeting as relevant officers were not present to respond.

Councillor Jarvis, as a member of the budget review group, noted that recommendation 4 had been discussed repeatedly in earlier years, and noted that it broadly held cross-party support. Councillor Jarvis recommended that the Committee endorse all the recommendations within the report.

The Committee resolved to:

1. **Endorse** the report and recommendations from the Budget Review Group, subject to the amendments set out above.
- **Delegate** authority to the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor, in consultation with the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, to make minor amendments to the report.

102. Scrutiny Work Plan

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor summarised the work plan and asked the Committee to consider whether they would be minded to consider the report on CIL and ward member budgets delegations expected at March Cabinet to answer any questions relating to ward member spend.

The Committee welcomed this.

The Chair invited additional suggestions from the Committee.

Based on existing issues within Oxford, Councillor Ottino suggested that a report on the City Council's role in highways management be brought forward, with a focus on powers and lessons learned.

Councillor Taylor suggested that the report scrutinise how ODS deliver this work as the responsible body.

The Chair welcomed this and suggested that the report also consider walkways as well as roads.

Councillor Miles suggested that the report be framed around commissioning and payment channels.

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor committed to taking away the suggestions and discussing the feasibility of the suggestions with relevant officers.

The Chair emphasised the importance of the topic with consideration of Local Government Reorganisation and the potential responsibilities that a new unitary authority could take on for highways management.

The Committee **noted** the workplan.

103. Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations

The Chair informed the Committee of Cabinet's responses to their recent recommendations, as set out in the report. Regarding the Local Plan, the Committee understood that Council had considered a recommendation relating to the creation of new local centres but not taken it forward.

Then Committee discussed the decision taken at Council and requested that the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor obtain additional guidance from relevant officers to support Members' understanding of why some recommendations were not taken forward.

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

104. Endorsement of Recommendations from Working Groups

There were no recommendations to endorse.

105. Dates of future meetings

The Chair invited the Committee to consider an adaptation to the timing of the next meeting to accommodate Members observing Ramadan. The Committee agreed that the next meeting would begin at 18.15.

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

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm

Chair
2026

Date: Tuesday 10 March

When decisions take effect:

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

All other committees: immediately.

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