

Minutes of a meeting of the Council on Wednesday 14 January 2026

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Committee members present:

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| Councillor Altaf-Khan | Councillor Arshad |
| Councillor Azad | Councillor Brown |
| Councillor Chapman | Councillor Clarkson |
| Councillor Corais | Councillor Diggins |
| Councillor Djafari-Marbini | Councillor Fouweather |
| Councillor Fry | Councillor Gant (Sheriff) |
| Councillor Goddard | Councillor Harley |
| Councillor Henwood | Councillor Hollingsworth |
| Councillor Jarvis | Councillor Jupp |
| Councillor Kerr | Councillor Lygo |
| Councillor Malik | Councillor Miles |
| Councillor Max Morris | Councillor Muddiman |
| Councillor Munkonge | Councillor Ottino |
| Councillor Powell | Councillor Pressel |
| Councillor Qayyum | Councillor Railton |
| Councillor Rawle | Councillor Regisford |
| Councillor Rehman | Councillor Robinson |
| Councillor Rowley (Deputy Lord Mayor) | Councillor Sandelson |
| Councillor Stares | Councillor Roz Smith |
| Councillor Taylor | Councillor Turner |
| Councillor Upton (Lord Mayor) | Councillor Yeatman |

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Caroline Green, Chief Executive
Emma Jackman, Director of Law, Governance, and Strategy
Jonathan Malton, Committee and Member Services Manager
Dr Brenda McCollum, Committee and Member Services
Martin John, Electoral Services Manager

71. Apologies for absence

Councillors Jemima Hunt, Amar Latif, Edward Mundy, Jo Sandelson, Chris Smowton, and Naomi Waite. Councillor Yeatman sent apologies for a late arrival.

72. Declarations of interest

None.

73. Public addresses that relate to matters for decision at this meeting

There were no addresses or questions.

74. Oxford City Council Local Elections 2026

The Chief Executive had submitted a report regarding a recent letter from the Government regarding local elections in 2026.

Councillor Brown presented the report which was before Council. She said that the Council had received a letter just before Christmas from central government, regarding the possible postponement of local elections in 2026. This special meeting of Council was called to consider the Leader's response to the letter from central government. Councillor Brown said that the draft minutes of the current meeting would be appended to her response to central government to ensure that all views are presented.

Councillor Goddard outlined his and his colleagues reasoning for calling for the special meeting of council. He said that their response to government should be a firm no and that the 2026 local elections should proceed as planned. He said that postponing these elections would deprive the people of the city the right to vote and their right to hold elected officials accountable. He argued that it would be undemocratic to deprive the people of Oxford of their right to vote by cancelling the 2026 local elections. He expressed his opposition to any postponement or cancellation of the 2026 local elections.

Councillor Kerr stated that the cancellation of the 2026 local elections would be a case of democratic backsliding.

Councillor Turner expressed sympathy with people's points about the timing and the process around deciding this matter. He noted that different councils in other areas of the country were taking different views on the matter. He acknowledged the importance of voting for democratic functions. He noted the costs and disruption to business of elections and the all-out election planned for 2027. He expressed his support for the postponement of the 2026 elections.

Councillor Powell said that it was disappointing that they would not be voting on this issue today. He said that he was in favour of holding the 2026 elections and that to deny residents the ability to participate in this election would be democratic backsliding. He noted that they did not know the shape or outcome of Local Government Reorganisation at this point, but that there were democratic issues to be considered throughout the processes and decisions to be made before and as Local Government

Reorganisation unfolds. He urged the Leader to argue for the local elections to proceed as planned.

Councillor Henwood stated that elections are the foundation of democracy and that they are essential to public trust. He added that postponing an election has consequences and raises the troubling question of if not now, then when. He said that if elections can not be free fair and accessible to all, the legitimacy of their elections and democracy were at risk. He continued and said that elections should not be decided behind closed doors. He concurred with Councillors Goddard, Kerr, and Powell on their frustration of not being able to vote on this matter. He expressed his support for elections in 2026 to proceed as planned.

Councillor Roz Smith said that she had not expected to see Local Government Reorganisation happening so soon under the Labour government. She said that she was also surprised to see the letter from government asking about delaying the 2026 elections. She stated that Local Government Reorganisation will be the Labour administration's biggest regret. She said that the national government was letting this country down and that she disappointed by their decisions. She added that denying people's ability to have a vote is a disappointment and an embarrassment. She urged the Leader to think about how she writes to government and to think about the interests of Oxford residents. She said that it would be undemocratic to cancel the elections they have planned for May of 2026.

Councillor Miles said that delaying local elections is democracy denied and would silence the views of Oxford residents. She expressed her belief in democracy and people's ability to hold elected officials accountable. She said that elections should take place as planned. She argued that the short duration of the term was not a viable argument to delay elections and neither was resource capacity. She argued that they should never cut the budget for elections. She urged Councillor Brown to tell central government that they want the 2026 elections to go ahead as planned.

Councillor Stares asked if Government were considering what would be best for the city or themselves. This was why this choice was before them. She expressed her support for the 2026 elections to proceed as planned.

Councillor Altaf-Khan concurred with colleagues that capacity and budget arguments were not viable reasons to cancel the elections. He added that he was frustrated that there would be no vote on this issue. He said that different councils had taken different views on this issue. He said that if there was no election this year, a minority administration would be running the Council for another year and wield power over the reshaping of Local Government Reorganisation and over the new authority. He said that he was against the postponement of the 2026 local elections.

Councillor Malik said that he wanted the 2026 elections to go ahead as planned. He said that this was important for the electorate to hold them accountable and voice their opinions. He said that he was upset with the administration for supporting the postponement of local elections. He added that they have the capacity and resources for the elections to go ahead as planned. He said that the Leader should take their views into consideration and write to central government to demand that the 2026 elections go ahead.

Councillor Jupp endorsed colleague's comments and expressed regret on their not being able to take a vote on this matter. He said that these elections should not be postponed. He said that government had made the offer to postpone elections in the context of Local Government Reorganisation. On the evidence however, he said that the Oxford City Council had sufficient resources to enable the 2026 elections to go

ahead. He referenced the letter from the Chief Executive, which expressed her confidence that we can deliver Local Government Reorganisation and the elections. He said that there was no evidence that postponing the elections would free up essential capacity and thus no reason for them to request a postponement. He added that a postponement would harm trust in government, which is already at an all time low. By merely suggesting a delay in the electoral calendar he said that the government had struck a blow against democracy. He urged the Leader to reply to central government and say that there is no reason to postpone the election, and that no postponement should occur.

Councillor Clarkson said that when the issue was first raised, she was really torn. She acknowledged the arguments over election cost and stability. She said that they should make a decision regardless of what other councils will do. She added that they don't know with any certainty that Local Government Reorganisation will be decided in May of this year. She agreed that elections are expensive, but that in these turbulent times, denial of democracy has a greater cost. She said that she was in favour of the 2026 elections going ahead as planned.

Councillor Rawle said that she believed that postponing the elections would be undemocratic. She said that they do not know how long Local Government Reorganisation will take and that people have a right to choose who represents them as Local Government Reorganisation unfolds. She argued that there was no need to postpone the elections. She agreed with colleagues that it was disappointing that they were not able to vote on this matter as a Council.

Councillor Rehman said that everyone should express their views to the Leader, but that the Leader was not making the decision, ministers would be. He said that he believed they had wasted money today by having the meeting, as they could have communicated with the Leader without the meeting. He said that if they did not have the election, they could spend the money allocated for it on other services for residents. He said that delaying the elections may help to bring Local Government Reorganisation through more quickly. He argued that they want Local Government Reorganisation because of the issues with their current form of governance and the problems caused by the two-tier system. He said that elections should be postponed, because this was the best approach for the people of Oxford.

Councillor Morris said that he opposed the cancellation of the 2026 local elections. He agreed with colleagues on their reasons for not cancelling the elections. He said that they could see from the public gallery that the residents of Oxford were concerned about their democratic rights being taken away. He added that trust in politicians is already at an all all-time low and it was important for the administration to bear in mind that it will make their job harder if residents do not have faith in this chamber. He said that he was disappointed that they would not be able to vote on the statement or amendments to it and that this adds to the undemocratic issues raised with an already undemocratic question being put to the Council.

Councillor Pressel said that she would be happy to go to an election and talk about these achievements. She said that they'd had elections in 2025 and would have elections in 2026, 2027, and 2028. She said it would not be unreasonable to drop one of those elections.

Councillor Hollingsworth said that democracy and accountability were fundamental, both morally and to the country. He discussed the approach to elections in the last Local Government Reorganisation project in 1972. He said that they may have all-out elections for authorities in 2027 for the authorities that will be their successors in 2028,

but that is not certain. He added that they are not certain that this Council would cease to exist. He said that this authority could survive and run services for the foreseeable future. He expressed his view that if the government made it clear that this authority was going to cease to exist and did so immediately, then there would be some justification for the cancellation of elections, but he does not see that happening. If they are going to cancel elections, he said that they have to have absolute certainty that this council will no longer exist. Due to the uncertainty with Local Government Reorganisation, he said that they should not cancel the 2026 elections.

Councillor Railton said that a Local Government Reorganisation timetable should have been set out with the white paper in advance, not made up as they go. However, this did not happen, and they have to deal with that. She said that they want a Greater Oxford and delivering this would take real work. She said that preparing for a shadow authority and handover would drive the next year and this should only be for a year. She said that if there is a delay to the Local Government Reorganisation timetable, elections should happen in 2027 regardless. She expressed her hope that there would be all-out elections for the new authority in 2027.

Councillor Djafari-Marbini referred to the letter from the Minister of State which said that if there was a reason to cancel central government would listen to these concerns. She said that most councillors had voiced opposition to cancelling the elections and that they did have the capacity to have the elections. She expressed her support for the election in 2026. She said that she opposed the fact that they were not able to vote on this issue and opposed the cancellations of the 2026 local elections.

Councillor Chapman said that he understood the passion for the argument for democracy. He said that he was concerned not about the ability to hold elections in 2026, but also the long hard struggle to create a new authority after the 2026 elections. He said that no one in the chamber had ever had to engage with a change programme in local government as they were now facing. He said that the centre of his concern was stability and that they needed to make sure that the council runs well as they help develop a new authority. He noted that a lot of big decisions about what they will do in the next financial year would not be made after the election but would largely be made in the next two council meetings. Due to this, he argued that even if they had an election, and there was some change, they would have to operate by consensus due to the fractured nature of the Council. He said that he would respect the outcome of whatever the Leader chose to do.

Councillor Robinson said that she was against postponing the 2026 elections. She said that she had expected the opportunity to vote on this issue and that it was upsetting that they were not doing that today. She said that Local Government Reorganisation was causing confusion, and it was imperative that they encourage trust and stability. She said that they must do this by continuing the planned 2026 elections.

Councillor Rowley noted that many of the Councillors would be up for election in 2026. He said that the proposal government had put to them was that there would be an all-out election in 2027. He said that did not appear inherently undemocratic. However, he said that he hoped the Leader's letter would reflect that if they postpone 2026 elections, there must be the all-out 2027 elections. If they are to postpone elections, Local Government Reorganisation must go ahead as planned. He said that if that transition is not going to happen by way of all-out election in 2027, there was no reason to postpone the 2026 elections. As things stand, from a party point of view and as a Labour councillor, he said that it was inconvenient for a minority administration, where they have to get the agreement of the opposition to continue for another year and that could cause difficulties. However, he said that he was not coming at this issue from a party

point of view. He argued that only in the very limited circumstances he had laid out, could they delay the 2026 elections.

Councillor Muddiman expressed her disappointment that they were denied a vote on this issue. She said she was further disappointed that residents might be denied a vote in May. She said that the Chief Executive's report made it clear that there was no justification to delay the elections. She said that they had no certainty that there would be all-out elections in 2027. She asked the Leader to note that although they were being denied a vote, it was very clear from all speakers, that the majority of councillors want the elections to go ahead. She asked if Councillor Brown would be noting that in her letter to government. She expressed her opposition to the postponement of 2026 elections.

Councillor Munkonge said that it was clear that if the elections were postponed, the savings could be used for Local Government Reorganisation and that work could start sooner. He said that they had not thoroughly considered the issue of the capacity of leadership. He said that their senior leadership team were going through a lot, knowing that this Council will not exist in a few years' time. Around the country, he said that he had heard that local authorities had postponed elections and that councils of many different party affiliations had done this. He said that his view was to postpone the election, but he emphasised that they must ensure that the 2027 and 2028 elections proceed as planned.

Councillor Gant said that he was not in favour of postponing the elections and that he was disappointed that they were not able to vote on this issue. He said it had been interesting hearing the arguments to delay the elections, as there were no credible reasons to do this. He said that colleagues had said that there was a case for delaying the elections if they know for certain that they would have all-out elections in 2027, but they do not know this, so the 2026 elections must happen. He argued that the argument to have elections on a different cycle was not the same as postponing elections in 2026. He argued that there was a paucity of argument to cancel the 2026 elections. He said that the Minister of State had only said to take into account their capacity and that there was no case for this, as they do have the capacity to hold the elections. He urged the Leader to write in support of the 2026 elections going ahead as planned.

Councillor Taylor said that elections should go ahead in 2026. He said that he was unconvinced by the arguments to postpone the elections. He said that he was opposed to postponing the elections.

Councillor Diggins said that whatever happens, it will be confusing for residents. She said that this was happening while trust in democracy internationally is at an all time low. She said that it was important to make things as clear and democratic as possible and that there were different routes to go down to do that. As it stands, she said that the process is confusing and messy. She argued that cancelling elections would contribute to a further loss of public trust and that they should not postpone the elections.

Councillor Lygo agreed with Councillor Clarkson that this was about democracy in Oxford. As they are not sure of Local Government Reorganisation and its end date, he said that they should not postpone the 2026 elections. He said that this issue was about the residents and positioning would be the wrong thing to do.

Councillor Jarvis discussed the timeline of Local Government Reorganisation and how it related to cancelling the 2026 elections. He discussed the approach to elections in Norwich in 2010 and how this related to Local Government Reorganisation. He said

that they had no guarantees that the timeline would go ahead. He said that his was not a question of delaying an election, but of cancelling one entirely. He said that it was disturbing that the conversation had largely been about the cost of elections. He argued that elections were one of the best investments that a city could make in its residents. He said that it was always good to see people involved in local democracy, referencing the people in the public gallery. He argued that it is always good to see people involved and that giving people the right to vote is one of the best ways to do this. He encouraged leader to reflect that the majority of Councillors who spoke opposed the cancellation of the 2026 elections. He said that he opposed the cancellation of elections and expressed his disappointment that they were not having a vote on this issue.

Councillor Corais said that his preference would be to have the elections in May 2026. However, he said that he understood if the Council made a decision to postpone the elections to focus on the new authority and Local Government Reorganisation. He added that this was a very important project, as two-tier authorities fail for many reasons, and they should work to create the new authority as efficiently as possible.

Councillor Regisford argued that the 2026 elections must go ahead. She said that democratic backsliding was not an option. She noted that it was astonishing that at the last minute, they were not able to vote in this meeting on this issue. She said that she opposed the postponement of the 2026 elections.

Councillor Fouweather argued that it was vitally important for the 2026 elections to go ahead. He said that residents must have the ability to vote and exercise democracy. He argued that the elections would show that this city is run by democracy, not decrees from central government. He stated that it was not capacity locally, but capacity in the ministry, which had brought this decision forward for consideration. He said that this led him to believe that there would not be elections in 2027, but only in 2028. He agreed with colleagues that it was disgraceful that they were even talking about postponing local elections and worse, that they were not having a vote on it.

Councillor Harley argued that the May elections should go ahead. She said that she hoped it was clear to the Leader, from the responses in the meeting, that she should say that the elections should go ahead in May. She added that she was disappointed that they were not able to vote on this issue.

The Lord Mayor thanked everyone for speaking and listening respectfully.

Councillor Brown thanked all the Councillors for a healthy and respectful debate. She said that there was clearly strong support for elections and rightly so, as democracy is important. From the chamber today, she said it was clear that a majority would support the 2026 elections going ahead. However, she said that was not the question being posed to them. The question was posed about whether postponing the elections would impact on their capacity to deliver Local Government Reorganisation. She agreed that if elections were postponed, they must have elections in 2027.

Councillor Brown argued that there was a case to be made for capacity, that this was an issue for the Council. She recognized that when the government sought their view they had asked for local situations. She said that their local situation, in relation to their Local Government Reorganisation bid, is different from other councils. She said that their bid involves significant change to the surrounding area. If they are successful in their bid for a Greater Oxford, then they would be inheriting significant area around the city, and there would need to be a lot of work done over the next year to make sure that elections in 2027 are successful and the new wards are in place.

Councillor Brown noted the excellence of the Council’s officers and election team and said she was particularly thankful to the Chief Executive for her hard work. She said that there was validity in the capacity arguments for postponing the elections. She said that she would reflect the views of the Council in her response to government. She said that she did not believe that they could conclude that the entirety of the Council had given its view, as not all Councillors had spoken. However, she said that those views expressed in the meeting and in her communications with Group Leaders would be reflected in her response to government.

Council resolved to:

- 1. That Members consider and express views in relation to the City Council 2026 local elections following a letter from Minister McGovern to the Leader of the Council seeking her views on the postponement of the elections and if this could release essential capacity to deliver local government reorganisation and the Leader will ensure that all the views expressed tonight are reflected in the response to the Government and the draft minutes will be appended to that response.

Councillor Djafari-Marbini left the meeting during this item at 18:07.

The meeting started at 17:00 and ended at 18:17.

Chair

Date: Monday 26 January 2026

*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.
Details are in the Council’s Constitution.*