

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 25 November 2025 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 6.00pm.

Present: Councillors Milton (Chair), Armstrong, Barton, Day, Dray, Kennedy, Knight, Kohler, Luckhurst, Payne, and P Wightman.

Also Present: Councillors Boad, Chilvers, Davison, King, and Melrose.

Officers: Darren Knight – Deputy Chief Executive, Patricia Tuckwell – Civic and Committee Services Manager, Thomas Holness – Climate Change Projects and Delivery Officer, Graham Folkes-Skinner – Climate Change Team Leader, Gary Fisher – Development Manager, Andrew Cornfoot – Planning Policy & Major Sites Delivery Manager, Phil Clarke – Head of Place, Arts and Economy, Pam Chilvers – Bereavement Services Development Manager, Zoe Court – Head of Neighbourhood, and Steven Leathley – Strategic Finance Manager.

The Chair reminded the Committee of the importance of asking pre-scrutiny questions and the process around calling Cabinet items into scrutiny.

49. **Apologies and Substitutes**

- a) no apologies were received; and
- b) Councillor Kennedy substituted for Councillor Harrison.

50. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made

51. **Housing Five-Year Housing Land Supply**

The Committee considered a briefing paper from the Head of Place, Arts and Economy which provided Members with information relating to the Council's current situation in respect of its housing land supply. The Council did not currently have a five-year supply of housing land (5YHLS), and this was relevant because it impacted on how the Council should consider certain planning applications which would come before the Council. This matter also had workload, financial, and potentially reputational issues for the Council.

The briefing note explained what a five-year land supply was and why it was important; what factors impacted on a Council's land supply situation; Warwick District Council's current housing and land supply situation; and what it could do to address the lack of a five-year land supply in the future.

In terms of changes to improve performance, the most significant change that could assist the Council's housing land supply position was the adoption of the South Warwickshire Local Plan (SWLP). Other reports were being prepared for Councillors' consideration on this matter. The first of these would be the revisions to the timetable for the South Warwickshire Local Plan which would be considered by the Joint Cabinet Committee at its meeting on 18 December 2025.

More immediately, another measure which would assist the determination of planning applications was a reduction in the time taken to receive comments from consultees. Officers would continue to work with other organisations and agencies, including Warwickshire County Council, to seek to expedite these technical responses.

A further change which would speed up decision making was to extend the current scheme of delegation to officers. The proposed national scheme of delegation was likely also to achieve this, but WDC could amend its scheme of delegation before the national scheme came into effect, if it so chose.

The Committee thanked officers for the comprehensive report.

The Head of Place, Arts and Economy introduced the report and reminded Members that should questions arise after the meeting, they could contact officers to receive advice on this matter.

In answer to questions from Members, the Head of Place, Arts and Economy, the Development Manager, and the Planning Policy and Major Sites Delivery Manager advised that:

- when the current Local Plan was adopted, the Council estimated 1,800 dwellings could be achieved at the King's Hill site during the life of the current Local Plan. Although planning permission had been granted, the site had not progressed, and this did take a significant proportion of the deficit. The Council was doing all it could to encourage the site to come forward, working with Warwickshire County Council, Coventry City Council, and the developer to overcome some of the technical issues, as well as Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Homes England;
- the Council was unlikely to achieve its five-year land supply before the adoption of the new South Warwickshire Local Plan (SWLP);
- when the new Local Plan was examined by the Inspector, it would have to prove that it had a five-year supply of deliverable sites. The plan would not be found to be sound without this, and it was important to ensure sufficient supply was available for the life of the Plan;
- when considering Planning applications, due to the tilted balance and lack of five-year housing land supply, there were conditions which could be imposed which wouldn't otherwise. These were around restricting the life of an application and the delivery plan, to encourage the applicants to bring the scheme forward quicker;
- the tilted balance, which needed to be applied in considering planning applications whilst there was a lack of five-year housing land supply provision, meant that there were some scenarios where the principle of development would be considered acceptable when normally, this might not have been the case;
- a significant number of other local authorities found themselves in the same position;
- in terms of lessons learnt, one was the importance of having a range of sites of different sizes, some of which could come forward in a shorter timeframe;
- the Council was supporting sites in a number of ways, including through the provision of site delivery officers;

- in the summer, the Government had announced a technical consultation on the operation of Planning Committees, with elements around training, size, and the proposal to significantly extend the delegations to officers. Currently, each Council could set its own delegations, but the Government was proposing a national scheme instead. The Head of Place, Arts and Economy would circulate the consultation and this Council's submission to it;
- in terms of the Housing Delivery Test, this was an annual calculation from the Government to measure housing delivery, which was last published a year ago. Should the Council's score fall below 100% in future years, there would be consequences, one of which being that WDC would need to produce a Housing Delivery Action Plan;
- granted sites which had not come forward yet would count towards the Council's commitment;
- in relation questions raised by Councillor Boad, Chair of the Planning Committee, prior to the meeting, the Head of Place, Arts and Economy would circulate specific guidance from legal services on how to consider applications within the Green Belt in the current situation after the meeting;
- land could only be taken out of the Green Belt through the Local Plan setting process;
- further training would be provided to Members of the Planning Committee in light of recent applications which came forward for consideration;
- it was important that when applications were refused, Members needed to be comfortable with the strength of the reasons for refusal, so that the Council could defend its position in appeal cases, which, in turn, should also minimise costs to the Council;
- officers' working assumption was that the King's Hill site would be delivered, despite it taking longer than expected, and decisions around what sites were to be included in the SWLP had yet to be taken;
- a previous appeal by Cala Homes helped the Council identify that it did not have its five-year housing land supply and since then, the Planning Committee had been advised accordingly by officers; and
- in terms of the impact of the Local Government re-organisation, officers' expectation was that if and when this would happen, that a whole new authority would be the basis for new calculations.

In reference to Section 5.3 in the report and with residents in mind, Councillors Day and Milton were keen to ensure every effort was made to move applications forward speedily. Councillor Milton agreed to write to the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Place asking for the current delegations to officers to be reviewed, and for the provision in the national scheme to be brought forward quicker.

Resolved that

- (1) the briefing paper be noted;
- (2) the national consultation on the planning reform as well as the Council's response to it be circulated to Members by the Head of Place, Arts and Economy;
- (3) legal advice regarding the application of the tilted balance for applications in the Green Belt be

provided to all Councillors by the Head of Place, Arts and Economy. Members asked for the advice itself, alongside a short briefing for Members; and

- (4) the Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to write to the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Place asking for the current delegations to officers to be reviewed, and for the provision in the national scheme to be brought forward quicker.

52. **Bereavement Services Performance Update**

The Committee considered a briefing paper from Neighbourhood Services which provided an update in regard to the underperformance of Bereavement Services in the 2024/2025 Quarter 3 budget report to Cabinet on 19 March 2025.

Bereavement services were part of the Neighbourhood Services Portfolio, managing Oakley Wood Crematorium, Oakley Wood natural woodland burial area, Royal Leamington Spa Cemetery, Warwick Cemetery, Kenilworth Cemetery, and Old Milverton Cemetery.

The service kept and maintained statutory burial and grave ownership registers and plans dating from 1859. Statutory cremation registers for Oakley Wood date from 1972. Records prior to 1993 were manual ledgers kept at Oakley Wood in fireproof safes.

The natural woodland burial area at Oakley Wood was opened in 2008. There were strict rules enforced to ensure burials had a minimal impact on the natural biodiversity of the ancient woodland. Only single burial was permitted; coffins had to be natural and biodegradable, for example, wicker or wool. There were no headstones. There were 480 graves plotted out in the woodland, however, there were only around 10 or so burials each year so this area was expected to last for more than 50 years based on the current demand.

Kenilworth was the only cemetery where the chapel was still in use. There were approximately 4,500 graves, but most were used. A new section had been plotted out with 350 graves, based on current demand this would last approximately 10 years. The cremated remains section had plenty of room.

Royal Leamington Spa cemetery had two disused chapels; they were currently being used for equipment storage. There are approximately 25,000 graves, most were used. There were two newer sections, one lawn section where headstones only could be erected on preinstalled concrete plinths, the other offering the opportunity to have a full traditional memorial with headstone and kerb surrounds. These newer sections were expected to last 10 – 12 years. The existing section for cremated remains was reviewed each year due to an adjacent badger sett. There was a large area in the newer part of the cemetery that was unsuitable for full burial, this could be used for cremated remains graves and would provide at least 50 years' worth of new ashes graves. There was additional land, designated for cemetery use, currently being used as allotments.

Warwick cemetery was approaching being full and did not have any room to expand. There were fewer than 150 new graves available for full body burial. Based on current demand they might last approximately five years. It would still be possible to re-open family graves. There was plenty of room for cremated remains graves.

Milverton cemetery was full, however, two tarmac paths had been removed and restored to turf. It would be possible to create additional cremated remains graves on those back-filled paths.

Cemetery fees and charges were increased by 200% for non-resident burials to mitigate the limited space being available for residents of Warwick District. The non-resident fee policy would be reviewed and programmed into the forward plan for a decision in early 2026. The Bereavement Services Team were a small team with 10 members of staff delivering burial and cremation services, they were based at Oakley Wood crematorium.

Service area measures were extended in 2024 to include percentage market share. This compared the number of burials undertaken to the number of deaths in Warwick District and the number of cremations taking place compared to the number of deaths in Warwickshire.

Generally deceased people requiring burial would be buried in the town or District where they lived, however, there might be requirements due to religious belief, desire for a less traditional burial than is offered in a municipal cemetery, or desire to be reunited in their hometown. For this reason, the market share calculations for burial were based on the Warwick District death registration.

The choice of cremation venue was influenced by several factors; priorities would differ for each individual funeral. For those having a funeral ceremony or wanting to attend the service of committal convenience of location was an important consideration, this might explain why many people who lived in Kenilworth might choose to be cremated at Canley crematorium in Coventry, and why many people who lived in Stratford-upon-Avon which was not in the District choose Oakley Wood. People were generally more geographically mobile. Being able to choose a convenient day and time for those travelling was often an important consideration. Where there was no ceremony, such as in the case of a direct cremation location became less important; price appeared to be one of the driving factors.

In recent years WDC had seen increased competition from new crematoria opening nearby.

The bereavement landscape was evolving, provisional figures for 2024 indicated that nationally 82.6% of people were cremated. The first British crematorium opened in Surrey in 1885, by the time of the Cremation Act 1902 there were eight crematoria, but cremation was not popular. In 1932 still only 1% of funerals were cremation, by 1947 this increased to 10%. Oakley Wood was built in 1971 and was the 207th crematorium by which time 52% of funerals were cremations. There were now 336 crematoria in the British Isles.

In 2014, a joint committee of Rugby BC and West Northamptonshire Council opened Rainsbrook Crematorium. They carried out 576 cremations in the first year; to end of 2024 they had carried out 10,234 cremations.

The Westerleigh Group, a private operator with over 40 crematoria nationally opened The Vale crematorium bordering Pershore and Evesham in December 2018. They carried out 43 cremations that year; to the end of 2024 they had carried out 8,982 cremations.

Comparison of cremation numbers (by calendar year) for Oakley Wood and neighbouring crematoria could be found at Appendix 1 to the report.

There was growing demand for "direct" cremation. The deceased was collected from the place where they passed away to a funeral directors mortuary facility, they were placed into a coffin and taken directly to the crematorium, there was no ceremony, and no mourners were present; the cremation took place and then cremated remains were returned to the family or scattered. National statistics indicate around 20% of cremations that took place in 2024 were direct cremations.

Pure Cremation, an external third party, were marketing direct cremations nationally, the deceased person was taken into their care from anywhere in the UK, cremated at one of the Pure Cremation crematoria and cremated remains returned to the family for private disposal as desired.

Corporately owned and cooperative funeral directors with branches in the District were offering fixed price direct cremation as a bundled package. The date, time, and venue were chosen by the funeral director.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) information for deaths registered by area of usual residence indicated that in 2024 there were 6,155 deaths for Warwickshire County, of which 1,354 resided in Warwick District. Additional ONS data was set out in Appendix 6 to the report.

As a discretionary service providing surplus to the Council's general fund, Bereavement Services were challenged to ensure income maximisation.

Fees & Charges were reviewed each year, with due regard to the targets issued by finance, in accordance with the Financial Strategy and Code of Financial Practice, specifically considering:- The level of prices the market could bear and including comparisons with neighbouring and other local authorities (examples of the benchmarking comparisons for 2025 could be found in Appendix 2 to the report).

Since 2020 the standard adult cremation fee at Oakley Wood had increased by 43.75%. The Bank of England inflation calculator, which used Consumer Price Index (CPI) data from the Office of National Statistics indicated the change in value over the same period is 27.8%. – Historical price data was set out in Appendix 3 to the report.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) final report issued in 2020 found that the markets for funeral directors and crematoria were not functioning well. A legally binding Funeral Market Investigation order was introduced in 2021. Although they stated that the Covid-19 pandemic severely restricted the CMA's ability to design and calibrate all the remedies that it might otherwise have introduced under more normal circumstances, the 2025 annual outcomes report confirmed they were not considering further measures at this point in time.

In 2024 an external review of fees & charges was undertaken by Commercial Gov, who provided support and expertise to public sector organisations to help develop commercial growth. Their conclusion was that there was not a lot of wriggle room as the fees were already right near the top of benchmarking comparators both with other Councils and private sector competitors. There was only one possibility indicated, to increase the grant of Exclusive Right of Burial from 50 years to 60 years as a means of increasing the price, however, this was flagged by them as likely to have a negative reaction from the public and funeral directors. It was therefore not put forward as a recommendation for the fees and charges. Comparisons for this were set out in Appendix 4 to the report.

In February 2025 the South chapel at Oakley Wood developed a leaking roof, the chapel had to be closed for eight weeks, whilst repairs were carried out. This resulted in a loss of income estimated in the region of £72,000 to £84,000. Calculations for the impact of the closure were set out in Appendix 5 to the report.

Popularity for book of remembrance entries and other "on-site" cremation memorials was in decline. This might be partly attributed to the increasing numbers of cremated remains that were removed from the crematorium for private disposal rather than being scattered in the woodland gardens of remembrance, coupled with lack of aggressive marketing for memorial options.

Live streaming and visual tributes were introduced into the North and South chapels at Oakley Wood in 2023 following the installation of fibre broadband, this provision continued to grow in popularity.

Bereavement Services were working with internal colleagues in the Marketing and Media team to improve existing promotional and marketing literature.

The Marketing and Media team were also assisting with redesigning the web pages. An initial proposal to develop a completely stand-alone website was considered; however, improvement packages for the existing Warwick District Council website had recently been agreed. These improvements would modernise the whole website themes, providing more design options.

The new web pages would then be migrated to the new themes and would have the illusion of being a separate website. It was anticipated the web pages would be live in quarter 2 of 2026. The designs of the new web pages would aid customers who were seeking information and would offer memorials and other items in a more attractive setting.

The advantages of using the same website platform were lower initial costs and avoiding additional fees for hosting or ongoing maintenance. It would be easier to update and ensure high accessibility standards were maintained.

Further developments and opportunities being considered were set out in the Confidential Appendix 7 to this report.

In answer to Members questions, the Bereavement Services Development Manager, the Deputy Chief Executive, and the Portfolio Holder for Resources explained that:

- it was difficult to give a factual answer to the reason why Dignity Crematorium in Nuneaton maintained market share when they were one of the most expensive, given they were a private operator;
- WDC crematorium staff did not have a similar relationship with Dignity Crematorium that they did with other local authority crematoriums;
- it was difficult to forecast an annual income prediction before the end of quarter 3;
- the crematorium did not operate at 100% capacity;
- the crematorium was serviced quarterly;
- the south crematorium roof had been fixed, however, there were issues with the north crematorium roof;
- the motivation for the 'Friends of Oakley Woods' was the wider woodland not the crematorium itself or bereavement services;
- crematorium staff worked closely with staff from the Council's green spaces department;
- the high level of service provided at Oakley Wood Crematorium had been recognised nationally;
- staff would consider how WDC would prioritise any planned investment into the crematorium;
- there was room for improvement with the crematorium services listed on the website;
- there were proposals to change the bereavement services themes on the website;
- once the changes to the website had been completed, staff would talk Committee Members through the changes;
- there had been an increase in demand for cremations without a ceremony following covid;
- there had been a change in attitudes toward funerals, following Covid and high-profile personalities requesting cremation without ceremony;
- there had not been a business case written as yet in relation to replacing the crematoria in five years, however, it was possible to repair the crematoria as opposed to replacing it. Closer to the end of the crematoria's life span, the Council would need to write a business case and consider fuel sources available; and
- there would be another crematorium open day, during 'Dying Matters' week, in May 2026. Committee Members were welcome to attend.

The Committee thanked the Bereavement Services Development Manager for the report and the Bereavement Services Team for the important work that they do.

The Chair suggested Cabinet and the Deputy Chief Executive, as part of the change programme, reflect on the investment opportunities needed to secure a wider market share, given the annual numbers of cremations at Dignity Crematorium, and the significant impact bereavement services had on income for WDC.

Resolved that the report and appendices, be noted.

53. **Work Programme, Forward Plan, & Comments from Cabinet**

The Committee considered a report from Governance Services which informed Members of Overview & Scrutiny Committee of the Committee's work programme for 2025-2026, attached as Appendix 1 to the report, and sought confirmation of approach of a number of areas in respect of that work plan.

Cabinet item 24, Disposal of 1 Warwick Street had not been called in to Overview & Scrutiny, however, the Chair requested that this be added as an agenda item to the work programme and for this to be discussed in public session.

Project Management Capacity & Capability was listed on the work programme as an agenda item at Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 3 February 2026. The Chair asked that this report incorporated a lessons learned exercise in relation to Cabinet item 22, Pump Rooms Roof Replacement Project.

Resolved that the work programme attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be noted.

54. **Cabinet Agenda (Non-Confidential items and reports) – Thursday 27 November 2025**

The Committee considered the following non-confidential items which would be discussed at the meeting of the Cabinet:

Item 12 – Q2 Budget Update 2025/26

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked officers for the report and emphasised the importance of the Homelessness Strategy, given the impact of that line of work onto the Council's finances.

Item 9 – Subsidy Control

(The Committee entered confidential session, at 7.48pm, during this item, excluding the public and press from the meeting. Public session was resumed, at 8.14pm, to conclude final comment for Cabinet.)

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee spent time discussing the current situation with the proposed tenant and asked officers to deliver the scheme quickly and legally with all parties concerned, recognising that this is an important part of the creative quarter vision.

Item 15 - Low-Cost Loan Scheme for Private Domestic Retrofit

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recognised why the scheme was coming forward and the outcomes it is trying to achieve. However, Members had significant concerns about the lack of a full business case being submitted, sensitivity allowance and calculation of climate benefits trying to be achieved. Whilst comfortable for the work to continue to go ahead on the scheme, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommends that a further, appropriately detailed report should be brought forward to Cabinet before any commitment to finance the scheme is made.

Cabinet is required to vote on this item because it is a recommendation from the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

55. **Public & Press**

The public and press were not excluded from the meeting again, as the Committee did not need to consider the confidential items on the agenda.

56. **Cabinet Agenda (Confidential items and reports) – Thursday 27 November 2025**

There were no confidential items considered.

57. **Confidential Appendix to Minute Number 52 – Bereavement Services Update**

The confidential appendix was not considered.

(The meeting ended at 8.37pm.)

CHAIR
3 February 2025