

PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Wednesday, 5 February 2025 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.05 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liam Walker - in the Chair

Councillor Charlie Hicks
Councillor Nigel Simpson
Councillor Peter Stevens
Councillor Susanna Pressel
Councillor Bethia Thomas

Other Members in Attendance: Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations
Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet member for Transport Management
Cllr Daniel Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance
Cllr Neil Fawcett, Cabinet Member for Community & Corporate Services
Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Development Strategy

Officers: Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer (Deputy Chief Executive)
Paul Fermer, Director of Highways and Environment
Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place
Keith Stenning, Head of Network Management
Sean Rooney, Head of Highway Maintenance
James Dance, Team Leader (Highways Policy and Performance)
Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets
Michael Smedley, Head of Estates
Charles Butters, Strategic Property Advisor
Charles Rowton-Lee, Head of Commercial Agency (Savills)
Sophie Holder MRICS, Surveyor in Commercial Agency team (Savills)
Jonathan Holmes, Investment Director and Development Funding Head (Savills)
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

The Council considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda and reports, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

1/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Bennett (substituted by Cllr Stevens), Cllr Bloomfield and Cllr Enright. Cllr Sudbury sent apologies that he could not attend in person but did join online.

2/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

3/25 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The minutes for the meeting held on 13 November 2024 were **AGREED** as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

4/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

5/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda No. 5)

Paul Fermer, Director of Highways and Environment, and Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place, attended to offer guidance on potential scrutiny items.

The Committee **AGREED** to the forward work plan with several changes, including the addition of an item on Bus Service Funding for the April meeting, focusing on taxpayer subsidies and the Enhanced Partnership's governance.

The Director of Highways and Environment and Sean Rooney, Head of Highway Maintenance, assumed responsibility for Verge and Vegetation Management. The Rail Strategy was to be presented as a separate briefing.

It was also **NOTED** that the June meeting was to focus on crime and disorder, with the Chief Constable and the Police and Crime Commissioner to attend.

6/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee **NOTED** the action and recommendation tracker and appreciated the update on the s.106 item.

7/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS

(Agenda No. 7)

The Committee **NOTED** the draft Cabinet responses to the Flood Event Response and LTCP Monitoring Report items.

The Committee **AGREED** to the following actions:

- To request a more detailed response to Recommendation 1 in the Flood Event Response.

8/25 NETWORK COORDINATION OF ROAD AND STREET WORKS AND LANE RENTAL FOR OXFORDSHIRE

(Agenda No. 8)

Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet member for Transport Management, Paul Fermer, Director of Highways and Environment, and Keith Stenning, Head of Network Management, were invited to present a report on network coordination of road and street works and the proposed Lane Rental Scheme for Oxfordshire.

The Cabinet Member for Transport Management and the Head of Network Management summarised the Network Coordination of Road and Street Works and the Lane Rental Scheme for Oxfordshire. They highlighted that managing these works included various permits and regulations affecting residents. The Lane Rental Scheme was to incentivise efficient utility work through financial measures, generating revenue for highway maintenance. Delayed twice, due to logistical challenges, it was hoped the scheme could start in October 2025.

The Committee was **alerted** to a typographical error in the report on page 33, paragraph 7: the Council deals with circa 1,450 road closure applications each year, not 450.

The Cabinet Member for Transport Management explained that the delays were due to logistical challenges and changes in government requirements. The Head of Network Management added that industry consultation and feedback from town and parish Councils had also contributed to the delay. It was confirmed that, once the scheme received approval, it would be communicated to the public, emphasising its benefits.

The Head of Network Management agreed with members on the need for effective communication, including avoiding any misconceptions that the Council sought to profit from road works, and clarified that the scheme would not be universally applied but would target the busiest roads during sensitive times.

Members examined why the Council had been slower to apply for the Lane Rental Scheme than other county Councils such as Kent. The Head of Network Management explained that a Council needed to operate a successful permit scheme for three years before applying for a lane rental scheme. Previously, Oxfordshire only recorded road work notifications with minimal control as a noticing authority but had, in recent years, moved to a permit scheme. Kent County Council had effectively been

a pilot scheme when Lane Rental was extended out of London and schemes were gradually growing.

The Committee enquired about the Council's process for dealing with developers and utility works, focusing on the application procedure for road closures, the duration of requested closures, and the Council's ability to reject applications. Developers could apply for road closures, and the Council coordinated these applications to minimise disruption. The Council had the authority to reject applications or adjust the duration of closures, ensuring developers communicated specific closure dates to the local community.

North Street, was highlighted as an issue where a developer requested a 10-month closure for minor works, causing disruption. The Head of Network Management acknowledged this problem and stressed the importance of developers informing the local community about actual closure dates. The Council was working to ensure developers provided clear communication and evidence of their engagement with the community.

The Committee explored the estimated income from the lane rental scheme, including key risks and benefits. It was explained that the estimates were conservative to avoid overcommitting, as income depended on industry behaviour. It was confirmed that Thames Water was responsible for about half of the Section 74 overruns, amounting to approximately £200,000 in penalties.

The Committee inquired about the enforcement mechanisms for ensuring compliance with road work permits, challenging the durations requested by utilities, and the potential for fines. The Council had a dedicated team for enforcement, which included challenging the durations requested by utilities and ensuring compliance with permit conditions. Non-compliance by utilities could result in fines, and, although current fines were relatively low, a consultation was underway to significantly increase them. The current fines for non-compliance were £80, however the consultation hoped to double the fines to £160 and also apply them for weekend and bank holiday working.

Financial figures indicated an estimated surplus from the Lane Rental Scheme of £4m per annum after costs, with a budget line established at £2.1m. Legislation mandated that 50% of any surplus funds be allocated to highway maintenance, such as pothole repairs, with the remaining 50% for other purposes determined by the Council. It was suggested that increased fines could enhance compliance and communication, with the Head of Network Management noting that a review of fines was expected to lead to improvements in utility compliance.

Members asked if Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs), who were responsible for enforcing Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs), could assist in enforcement around utility works. The Head of Network Management explained that the Council employed around 20 individuals within the network coordination team, with approximately 12 personnel monitoring compliance and addressing issues daily. It was acknowledged that additional investment in CEOs would be beneficial, operating similarly to parking enforcement as a fee-based system.

It was also noted that while CEOs reported observed issues, their primary focus did not include road work enforcement. Network coordinators were more mobile, addressing issues as they emerged, whereas CEOs consistently covered the same areas. Although some cross-reporting occurred, it was not standard practice for CEOs to perform both roles.

The Committee raised separate concerns about simultaneous road and tree works in one division causing significant disruption, gas works in another causing traffic issues without visible work or a permit, and difficulties in contacting the duty manager after hours.

The Head of Network Management acknowledged the coordination issue in some places and requested detailed information to improve future coordination. It was explained that emergency gas works were unpredictable and admitted the lack of a permit was concerning, promising to investigate and ensure proper permitting and management. Efforts to strengthen coverage outside regular hours were ongoing but there was a 24 hour highways customer service number.

The Committee had explored the idea of creating a system similar to FixMyStreet for reporting road work hazards. The Head of Network Management responded that issues could be reported on FixMyStreet, although responses might not be immediate. It was suggested by Officers exploring technology, such as Artificial Intelligence or instant messaging, could improve this.

Members expressed concerns about firms not completing works due to disputes, leading to prolonged issues. The Head of Network Management clarified that legal disputes were handled by the legal department while the highways team stepped back. Concerns were also raised about inadequate monitoring of temporary traffic lights on weekends, which could lead to dangerous situations and leftover road signs and sandbags. The Department for Transport had authorised fines for work during weekends and bank holidays, and preparations were being made to enforce this with fines also in place for works that overstayed, which included leaving works materials. The Head of Network Management also addressed substandard reinstatements, reporting that 76% failed and a coring programme, where tests were done to the reinstated road surfaces to check they met the required standards, was implemented to assess quality.

Members suggested that parish councillors and local networks, such as super users, could report issues more effectively due to their community involvement and it was agreed that these were invaluable.

There was also an inquiry about the fines from Botley Road overruns. The Head of Network Management clarified that no fines were issued as contractors had extended their permits. If fines had been imposed, contractors could have appealed to the Department for Transport, which might have taken control of the project or service.

The Chair inquired about the Council's confidence in securing permission for the lane rental scheme. The Head of Network Management responded with 95% confidence, citing support and guidance from the Department for Transport. The main uncertainty

was the timing, which was expected between September and November of the next financial year.

The Committee thanked the Head of Network Management for his work and wished him a happy retirement.

The Committee **AGREED** to the following actions:

- The Head of Network Management to publish the information about the ‘worst offenders’ for going over the schedule agreed.
- The Head of Network Management to publish the number of fines issued over the last financial year to indicate the current enforcement mechanism's effectiveness.

The Committee **AGREED** to the following observations:

- Enforcement and Reporting:
 - Encourage and enforce better communication by utility companies.
 - Consider how to report urgent matters effectively, possibly using super users and parish Councils for better local reporting.
- Include in the new parking enforcement contract that Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) could be trained to report issues beyond parking violations, such as road works and traffic problems.

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

- Explore different models for enforcement, including the use of technology and crowdsourcing to report issues.
- Increase enforcement on street scars and ensure proper reinstatement of road surfaces after works.

9/25 REVIEW OF STREET LIGHTING AND ILLUMINATED ASSETS POLICY FRAMEWORK PROPOSALS FOR PART NIGHT LIGHTING (Agenda No. 9)

Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations, who joined online, Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, Sean Rooney, Head of Highway Maintenance, and James Dance, Team Leader (Highways Policy and Performance), were invited to present a report on the Review of Street Lighting and Illuminated Assets policy framework proposals for part night lighting.

The Deputy Leader and Head of Highway Maintenance presented the review, highlighting the need for a structured approach to part-night lighting, similar to that for the introduction of the 20-mph speed limit in various places across the county. The new proposals intended to refine and broaden the existing street lighting policy, with plans for extensive stakeholder engagement and consultation, including local

communities. The implementation framework was to be tailored to local contexts and aimed to balance energy savings and environmental benefits with safety and well-being, particularly for vulnerable groups and late-night workers.

A detailed timeline for engagement and implementation was provided, targeting a Cabinet member decision in July, with a project manager appointed to oversee the inclusive consultation process.

The Chair raised a number of concerns over the implementation and decision process leading up to this point. The Head of Highway Maintenance described how key roads and roundabouts were considered for exemption from switching off lights, prioritising safety with a case-by-case approach based on consultation feedback. Support and objection would be taken into account with individual cases reviewed and decisions made by the Cabinet member under delegated decisions powers.

Parish councillors and local communities were to be engaged in the process, initiating steps similar to the 20-mph speed limit implementation, ensuring each village or town was consulted and tailored to local needs. Changes required for LED lights varied, with part-night lighting supported by existing technology, although central management systems might have needed investment if widely adopted. Cost savings depended on the number of lights and the implementation model.

The Committee raised a number of safety concerns with the policy, especially in relation to Vision Zero and crime. The Deputy Leader and the Head of Highway Maintenance explained how the part-night lighting policy aimed to align with Vision Zero by balancing safety concerns, ensuring reduced lighting did not lead to increased accidents. Studies suggested that drivers adjusted their behaviour in darker conditions, and turning off lights did not necessarily result in more accidents.

Research on reduced lighting's impact on safety and crime was mixed. Some studies indicated no increase in accidents or crime, while others found that new lighting could reduce crime by increasing visibility. Evidence-based reviews informed the consultation process.

The policy included cyclist safety education and enforcement, making cyclists more visible and promoting adherence to regulations through campaigns. This involved distributing free lights in collaboration with partners such as Oxford Fire and Rescue.

Engagement with partners played a crucial role in enhancing safety. Collaboration with Oxford Fire and Rescue, cycling groups, and other stakeholders helped implement targeted safety campaigns and ensured a comprehensive approach to road safety.

The policy acknowledged concerns from women's groups about safety in the dark and involved a female perspective in its development. The strategy engaged relevant stakeholders, including women's groups, to gather input and address specific safety needs. A female project manager led this initiative, with contributions from female staff and stakeholders ensuring diverse perspectives were considered.

Members raised concerns about the safety of women and vulnerable members of society regarding the turning off of street lights. Evidence was presented by the Deputy Leader that academic research indicated turning off street lights did not necessarily lead to increased accidents or crime, as people tended to alter their behaviour, such as moving to other well lit areas.

The discussion highlighted the need to consider the safety and well-being of women and vulnerable members of society while implementing the part-night lighting policy, taking account of light pollution, energy consumption, and benefits to wildlife.

The data on crime and accidents were used to inform policy decisions, considering changes in citizens' habits. Modifications in street lighting were assessed for their impact on activities, such as a potential decrease in nighttime outings.

The Committee inquired about some of the technical terminology used in the report, and whether any alternative terminology which would be clearer to the public had been considered. The Head of Highway Maintenance explained that dimming referred to lowering streetlight brightness during low traffic. Instant switch over described how LED lights turned on and off instantly, unlike older lights. Dynamic real-time demand involved adjusting lighting based on real-time conditions with a central system. Retrofitting meant updating existing streetlights with new technology like motion sensors. Motion-activated lights, which turned on when motion was detected, were considered as an alternative to constant lighting. These alternatives aimed to balance safety, energy savings, and environmental impact.

The Chair thanked those who attended for the item and the Committee resolved to **NOTE** the report.

10/25 CITY CENTRE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY (Agenda No. 10)

Cllr Daniel Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer (Deputy Chief Executive), Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets, Michael Smedley, Head of Estates, Charles Butters, Strategic property Advisor, Charles Rowton-Lee, Head of Commercial Agency (Savills), Jonothan Holmes, Investment Director and Development Funding Head (Savills), and Sophie Holder MRICS, Surveyor in Commercial Agency team (Savills), were invited to present a report on the City Centre Accommodation Strategy. Cllr Neil Fawcett, Cabinet Member for Community & Corporate Services, and Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Development Strategy, also attended online.

The Cabinet Member for Finance reminded the Committee that the Council had been reviewing the city centre accommodation held by the Council. The Council had been working to reduce the number of county council buildings to reduce expenditure and to reflect contemporary working practices. In addition, the carbon inefficiency of the current estate meant that significant expenditure would be needed were County Hall to be retained.

The Director of Property and Assets took the Committee through a powerpoint presentation providing an overview of the background to the decision being

proposed. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) had undertaken a strategic review of the Council's city centre accommodation and, following its assessment of options with a recommended view, a report to Cabinet on 23 January 2024 recommended that option 2 be progressed. That option was to consolidate into Speedwell House and to dispose of New County Hall and to engage the market to inform a decision on Old County Hall.

Savills had been engaged by the Council to engage the market and to seek bids. Nineteen bids had been received with 16 of those being for both New and Old County Hall together whilst three were for either New County Hall or Old County Hall alone. The Committee was provided with the information in draft that was expected to be before Cabinet on 25 February 2025 when it will be recommended to, inter alia, "agree to the freehold disposal of New and Old County Hall, on the terms set out in exempt Annex 4."

The Committee was advised that both the disposal of County Hall and the transformation of Speedwell House provided the Council with the opportunity to use its assets, covenant and influence to be the 'place-shaper of choice' in Oxford city centre and to be at the heart of social regeneration. The capital receipt from the disposal of County House would be sufficient to fund the delivery of the refurbished Speedwell House complex and would also enable the wider regeneration and placemaking initiatives envisaged in and around Speedwell Street.

After the presentation, the Committee resolved to exclude the public for the duration of the meeting as the information provided in Annexes 2, 3, and 4 to the Cabinet report were deemed to contain exempt information and the public interest was weighted in favour of considering the information in private as the information related to a current commercial negotiation.

Topics explored by the Committee included which scrutiny committee should most appropriately have considered the proposal; the assessment of alternative options; potential socio-economic benefits; redevelopment strategies for Speedwell House; market engagement and bid processes; issues related to public access and heritage conservation; planning considerations; the implications of local government reorganisation.

The Committee resolved to **NOTE** the report and to **AGREE** the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. That the Council should work to ensure that public access to New and Old County Hall is maintained insofar as is possible.
2. That the Council should set out its strategy and action plan for the city centre's redevelopment and regeneration.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing