

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET

15 September 2026

OxBus 2040: Plan for Bus and Enhanced Partnership Plus Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on OxBUS 2040: Plan for Bus and Enhanced Partnership Plus at its meeting on 24 June 2026. The Committee had been asked to consider the proposed approach, content, engagement and consultation for the OxBUS 2040 Plan and Enhanced Partnership Plus before it went out to public consultation and prior to its consideration by Cabinet.
4. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Gareth Epps, Cabinet Member for Transport, Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, Ashley Hayden, Team Leader, and Katharine Broomfield, Integrated Transport Programme Lead, for attending to present the report and answer the Committee's questions.

SUMMARY

5. The Committee welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the emerging Plan before public consultation. The Cabinet Member explained that OxBUS 2040 was intended to provide a high-level strategic framework for the long-term direction of bus services in Oxfordshire, aligned with the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, and supported by the Enhanced Partnership Plus as the principal delivery mechanism.
6. The Committee noted that the Plan would not itself specify individual service changes but, instead, would set the long-term vision, outcomes and strategic direction for bus travel in Oxfordshire to 2040. The Committee was advised that the Enhanced Partnership Plus would provide the delivery mechanism for translating those ambitions into commitments, schemes and interventions through the statutory partnership framework.
7. Members broadly welcomed the ambition of the emerging Plan and recognised the importance of buses to Oxfordshire's wider transport, climate, inclusion, planning and economic objectives. The Committee supported the emphasis on better and safer journeys and on seamless and integrated travel as well as a cleaner, greener bus network.
8. The Committee's discussion focused particularly on rural connectivity, the financial and legal implications of the Enhanced Partnership Plus, inclusive engagement, real-time passenger information, the relationship between bus planning and development, and the need to integrate bus services with rail, mobility hubs, active travel and major destinations.
9. The recommendations below are intended to strengthen the Plan before public consultation and before the final draft returns to the Committee and subsequently to Cabinet. They aim to ensure that the Plan is not only ambitious but also deliverable and also seek to ensure that the Council is clear about the practical measures needed to improve bus provision across rural, urban and cross-boundary communities. They have been grouped under three headings: Rural connectivity and passenger experience; strategic network development and integration; governance, assurance, and evidence.
10. In addition, the Committee makes one observation to Cabinet which does not require a reply.

OBSERVATION

11. Members welcomed the proposed engagement approach, including the confirmation that a citizens' assembly would be undertaken and that younger people would be engaged through OxyGen, the Council's staff network for younger people. The Committee considered that this broader engagement should be complemented by direct discussion with groups representing people most likely to experience transport exclusion.

12. The Inclusive Transport and Mobility Group was identified as a particularly valuable forum for testing the Plan's accessibility and inclusion objectives. Members noted that the Plan aimed to promote inclusive and accessible bus travel, and considered that the experience of disabled people, older people, and others with access needs should inform the Plan before it was finalised.
13. Officers had indicated in the report that they were considering presenting to the Inclusive Transport and Mobility Group and confirmed during discussion that was the firm intention. The Committee makes the observation that it firmly endorses this intention. Such engagement will be key given the importance of accessibility to the Plan's stated objectives.

Observation: That the Committee strongly endorse the idea of presenting to the Inclusive Transport and Movement Focus Group.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural Connectivity and Passenger Experience

14. Rural connectivity was one of the Committee's principal concerns. Members emphasised that, whilst many rural routes might not be considered commercially viable, they were nevertheless essential to residents as lifeline services, enabling access to employment, education, healthcare, shops and social opportunities. The Committee believes it important that the forthcoming consultation should not treat rural connectivity as merely an aspect of the Plan but, rather, as a focal point. It believes it to be a central test of whether the Plan would work for the whole county.
15. In what is the most rural county in the south-east of England, the Committee is strongly of the view that the Council must recognise that rural connectivity is one of the most significant challenges for the bus network. The Committee was keen that there must be considerable attention paid to how rural connectivity can be not only sustained but also improved, albeit in a sustainable way.
16. The Committee was clear in its concern that, in such a largely rural county as Oxfordshire, it is essential that any consideration of bus services recognises that rural communities face particular disadvantages in accessing public transport. The success of the Bus Plan will rely on rural connectivity being joined up.
17. The Committee explored how the proposed list of socially necessary services would operate in practice. These would be particularly important in rural areas but, also, in some urban settings. Officers advised that the Council was required to define and publish such a list, and that detrimental changes to those services would require a robust mitigation process before being implemented. Members welcomed that assurance but considered that such a designation alone would not guarantee long-term service provision unless it was supported by a realistic approach to funding and delivery.

18. As explored in recommendation 7 below, the Committee has concerns that risks must be properly explored and understood regarding, not least, socially necessary services. However, it nonetheless welcomes such a category.

Recommendation 1: That the Council's OxBUS 2040 consultation should place a strong emphasis on rural connectivity and the protection of socially necessary services.

19. The Committee recognised that, whilst improving the core bus network is essential, many smaller villages and rural communities are unlikely to be served by frequent conventional bus routes. Members therefore discussed the importance of considering how residents can access the wider public transport network, particularly where settlements are located some distance from main bus corridors, rail stations, service centres or mobility hubs.
20. The challenge of the first/last mile connectivity was noted in Annex 3 to the report. During the discussion, Members highlighted that rural connectivity should not be viewed solely in terms of direct bus services but should also include mechanisms that help people to reach strategic transport routes. As it has recommended previously, the Committee considered that feeder and shuttle services – whereby particularly rural communities are joined to bus routes – could play an important role in overcoming the practical barriers faced by residents in more isolated communities.
21. The Committee also heard examples of how feeder services could complement rather than compete with main bus routes. Members suggested that shuttle services could bring additional passengers onto core routes, helping to strengthen overall network viability whilst simultaneously addressing rural isolation. The discussion highlighted the importance of taking a holistic view of network design and considering how smaller-scale transport solutions could improve access to employment, healthcare, education, rail services and local centres. Members were keen that the Plan should explore successful examples from both within Oxfordshire¹, and elsewhere, such as Singapore², rather than relying solely on traditional bus service models.
22. Members further discussed the potential role of car clubs as part of a wider integrated transport system. It was noted that examples already exist where community-led or commercially operated car clubs³ help residents connect with public transport and reduce dependence on private car ownership. The Committee considered that car clubs, community transport, feeder services and mobility hubs should be viewed as complementary elements of a single transport network rather than separate initiatives. Given the Plan's emphasis on integrated travel and accessibility, Members concluded that the design of the future network should explicitly examine how these alternative forms of

¹https://oxfordsp.com/news/401/new_shuttle_bus_service_connecting_oxford_railway_station_and_the_oxford_science_park

² <https://onestc.org/2025/12/27/basics-long-feeders/>

³ <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/electric-vehicle-pilot> and <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/transport-planning/plug-in-suffolk/electric-vehicle-car-clubs>

provision could support rural communities and improve access to the wider public transport network.

Recommendation 2: That the Council should give consideration to the role of rural feeder and shuttle services, including car clubs, as part of the wider network design.

23. The Committee discussed the importance of real-time passenger information (RTPI) as a factor influencing confidence in bus travel, particularly in rural areas where services are less frequent and the consequences of a missed or delayed journey can be more significant. Members noted the report's indication that a substantial proportion of bus stops across Oxfordshire do not currently have real-time passenger information and questioned what effect this has on passenger behaviour and satisfaction. The Committee considered that, for many users, confidence that a bus is actually coming can be as important as the service itself, particularly where waiting facilities are limited and alternative travel options are unavailable. Members therefore felt that a stronger evidence base was required to understand the benefits that RTPI could deliver.
24. Members are aware that many rural stops are located in areas with poor mobile telephone coverage and that some passengers, particularly older residents, may not have access to smartphones or web applications that provide journey information. The Committee fully recognises that RTPI infrastructure carries both capital and ongoing revenue costs and therefore must be targeted carefully. Nonetheless, Members considered that investment decisions should be informed by a better understanding of the benefits to passengers. The Committee felt that particular attention should be paid to whether RTPI can help reduce perceived uncertainty, increase patronage, improve accessibility and make public transport a more attractive option in rural locations.
25. The Committee also noted that officers had indicated their intention to review available survey evidence and user research as part of the development of the Plan. Members welcomed this commitment and considered that further assessment would help the Council to ensure that future investment decisions are evidence-led.
26. Given the Plan's objective of creating what the Cabinet member described as "a network that works for every community across the county" and which will need a more reliable, accessible and integrated bus network, the Committee concluded that a fuller examination of the benefits of RTPI would help to identify where resources, albeit limited ones, could deliver the greatest value. This would be of particular use for communities that are currently most at risk of transport disadvantage.

Recommendation 3: That the Council should ensure that further work is undertaken to assess the benefits of real-time passenger information, particularly in rural areas.

Strategic Network Development and Integration

27. The Committee observed that, in members' experience, there has historically been something of a disconnect between the planning of new development and the delivery of supporting bus services. Members highlighted concerns that bus routes have been too often introduced too late in the development process, after residents have already established travel habits based around private car use. In discussion, concerns were raised about continuing housing growth and whether future residents would have access to dependable bus services from the outset. Officers acknowledged the importance of securing the necessary "hooks" early in the planning process so that transport provision is considered alongside housing and employment growth rather than afterwards.
28. The Committee also noted that the emerging OxBUS 2040 Plan sits alongside and as part of a panoply of transport documents, under the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, including Movement and Place Plans, Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans, and wider infrastructure planning processes. Members considered that these documents should work together to identify future travel demand, establish where new services and mobility hubs (or 'transport hubs' as the Committee has previously recommended they should be styled) are required, and support negotiations with developers. During the discussion, both Members and officers referred to the opportunity to use future growth to improve bus connectivity and create more sustainable travel patterns. The Committee considered that stronger alignment between planning and transport strategies would help to ensure that new development contributes positively to the viability of the bus network rather than creating additional dependence on private vehicles.
29. A particular focus of the discussion was the role of developer funding. Members emphasised that Section 106 contributions are one of the most significant opportunities available to support new bus services, mobility hubs, and associated infrastructure. The Committee considered that the Council should be clear about what transport infrastructure and services are required, where they are needed, and how developer contributions can be used to deliver them. Whilst officers noted the practical challenge of balancing early service provision against long-term commercial viability, Members considered that the Plan should establish a stronger expectation that bus services and supporting infrastructure are planned from the outset of development and supported through developer contributions wherever appropriate. This would help to ensure that sustainable travel options are available from the first occupation of new developments and would therefore support the wider objectives of both reducing car dependency and, also, encouraging modal shift.

Recommendation 4: That the Council should ensure that the Plan should strengthen alignment with planning and development, including the use of Section 106 contributions to secure early bus provision.

30. The Committee strongly supported the Plan's ambition to promote seamless and integrated travel, but Members considered that the document did not yet sufficiently explain how this integration would be achieved in practice. Throughout the discussion, Members repeatedly highlighted the importance of ensuring that bus services are planned as part of a wider transport network rather than as a standalone mode. Members referred to rail services, mobility hubs, active travel routes, local transport interchanges and connections between different bus services as essential components of an integrated public transport system. Whilst officers explained that the Plan would sit alongside other transport strategies and policy documents, Members felt that the relationship between these elements needed to be expressed more clearly within the Plan itself.
31. Several Members raised specific concerns regarding connectivity between bus and rail services. The Committee heard examples of positive developments such as integrated ticketing initiatives and improved coordination between bus and rail operators, which were regarded as evidence of the benefits that integration can deliver. Members also highlighted locations where poor connections continue to undermine public transport journeys, noting that passengers are often required to make inconvenient transfers or undertake lengthy walks between transport services. The Committee considered that improving connections between buses, rail services and other transport modes is fundamental to encouraging modal shift away from private car use and achieving the wider objectives of the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan.
32. Members also placed significant emphasis on the role of mobility hubs as a mechanism for bringing together buses, rail, walking, cycling, community transport, car clubs and other transport services. The Committee noted that mobility hubs were referenced across a number of related transport strategies and considered that they provide an important opportunity to create a more coherent and accessible transport network. Members expressed the view that stronger integration would be particularly beneficial for rural communities, helping residents to access higher-frequency transport corridors, rail stations and key destinations such as employment centres and hospitals. The Committee therefore concluded that the Plan should articulate more clearly how integration across modes will be delivered, how mobility hubs will support that integration, and how the various transport strategies being developed by the Council will work together to create a genuinely connected transport system.

Recommendation 5: That the Council should ensure that the Plan should articulate more clearly how it will deliver integration across modes, including rail and mobility hubs.

33. The Committee is of the view that the emerging Plan would be strengthened by providing a clearer explanation of how Oxfordshire's current bus network has evolved and why a long-term programme of rebuilding and improvement is required. Members noted that many communities, particularly in rural areas, have experienced reductions in service provision over a prolonged period, resulting in lost connections, reduced frequencies, and greater dependence on private cars. Members considered that the challenges currently facing the bus network cannot be understood properly without acknowledging this historical context. Including such a section would help explain why some areas have weaker bus provision than others and why restoring connectivity will inevitably take time given that it will require both investment and partnership working.
34. The Committee also recognised that the bus network has been affected by a series of significant external pressures in recent years. Members referred to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on passenger numbers, difficulties experienced across the bus sector in maintaining and procuring services, rising operating costs, changes in travel patterns and wider economic uncertainty. The Cabinet Member similarly referred to the challenges facing the industry and the need to create a sustainable foundation for future growth. The Committee considered that acknowledging these factors, with a specific section setting out the wider context, would provide a more balanced and realistic explanation of the current position and help residents understand the constraints within which the Council and operators are working.

Recommendation 6: That the Council should include a section which contextualises the rebuilding of the bus network in the Plan.

Governance, Assurance, and Evidence

35. The Committee devoted considerable attention to understanding how the proposed Enhanced Partnership Plus (EP+) would operate in practice and what additional obligations it would place on both the Council and bus operators. Members recognised that EP+ is intended to be the principal delivery mechanism for the ambitions set out in OxBUS 2040 and therefore considered it essential that the respective responsibilities of all parties are clearly understood.
36. The Committee was keen to explore the financial and legal risks associated with the EP+ model. Officers explained that the extent to which operators, or the partnership as a whole, would be legally bound to maintain particular services would depend on how the Enhanced Partnership Plus was drafted. In view of that, the Committee considered it should see a comprehensive assessment of potential revenue liabilities before the framework was adopted.

This would enable any subsequent recommendations to Cabinet to be fully informed.

37. During the discussion, Members questioned what would happen if an operator wished to withdraw from an unprofitable rural or evening service and sought clarification on the extent to which the partnership could require services to be maintained. Officers explained that the answer would depend significantly upon how the EP+ framework was ultimately drafted and the commitments it contained. The Committee therefore concluded that greater clarity regarding responsibilities and obligations would be necessary before the framework is adopted.
38. Members were also concerned about the practical implications of creating legally binding commitments. Officers advised that, if specific service requirements were explicitly included within the partnership, those commitments could become legally enforceable and carry consequences were they were not fulfilled. At the same time, officers explained that one of the advantages of EP+ would be to secure more transparent relationships with operators, including greater openness regarding service performance and finances, stronger engagement on network planning, and earlier involvement where service changes were proposed. Whilst Members welcomed these benefits, they considered that the framework should clearly distinguish between aspirational objectives and binding obligations so that all parties understand where accountability lies and what actions may be required if difficulties arise.
39. The Committee further considered that transparency regarding legal, financial and operational risks would support better decision-making by Cabinet but it would also be of benefit to members scrutinising the proposals. Members noted that bus services operate in a rapidly changing environment affected by economic pressures, operator viability, funding availability, patronage levels and wider transport policy changes. As OxBUS 2040 is intended to provide a long-term strategic framework during a period of potential local government reorganisation and devolution, the Committee considered it particularly important that the EP+ framework explicitly identifies key risks, clarifies how those risks will be managed, and sets out the responsibilities of the Council and operators in responding to them. This would provide greater certainty for stakeholders and improve confidence in the deliverability of the partnership arrangements.

Recommendation 7: That the Council should ensure that the framework for Enhanced Partnership Plus clearly sets out legal obligations, operator responsibilities, and associated risks.

40. The Committee considered that OxBUS 2040 should be informed by evidence of what has worked successfully in other places rather than relying solely on Oxfordshire's own experience. Members noted that many of the challenges identified in the report, including rural connectivity, integration between transport modes, real-time passenger information, mobility hubs, shuttle services and network design, are not unique to Oxfordshire. As a result, the

Committee felt that valuable lessons could be drawn from authorities and regions that have already implemented innovative approaches to addressing similar issues. Members considered that understanding successful examples elsewhere would strengthen both the evidence base and also the public credibility of the Plan.

41. In Committee, Members specifically highlighted the importance of looking beyond the county when considering possible solutions. It was suggested that the Council should make greater use of examples from other councils – whether, for example, Cornwall Council with its whole-system approach which has combined network investments, integrated fares, community transport and where patronage has grown significantly since 2019⁴ or Lincolnshire's CallConnect⁵ – and, where appropriate, international experience (including, perhaps, Connecting Ireland⁶ or the Flanders Hoppin network⁷) rather than necessarily assuming that new ideas would need to be piloted locally before they could be considered. The Committee considered that reviewing established practice elsewhere could help the Council to identify proven approaches to issues such as rural shuttles, integrated ticketing, mobility hubs, guided bus systems, real-time passenger information, as well as improving connectivity between transport modes. Members viewed this both as an opportunity to accelerate learning and also to avoid repeating mistakes already encountered in other places.
42. The Committee was encouraged by officers' confirmation that examples from across the United Kingdom and potentially from Europe and elsewhere would be considered in developing the Plan. Members nevertheless felt that this commitment should be reflected more explicitly within the Plan itself. This would help ensure that the Council, and its successor bodies, remains at the forefront of transport innovation and adopts approaches that have already been shown to deliver positive outcomes for passengers and communities.

Recommendation 8: That the Council should ensure that the Plan should incorporate learning from best practice elsewhere, including national and international examples.

43. Members welcomed the summary of the Oxon for Buses submission in the Committee report. The Committee noted that the submission was regarded as detailed, constructive, and particularly relevant to the development of the Plan.
44. The Committee recognised that Cabinet should receive a balanced evidence base and that one stakeholder response should not displace the voices of others. However, Members considered that the Oxon for Buses submission contained additional material beyond the report summary which would be useful to Cabinet when considering the development of the Plan.

⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/134616/html/>

⁵ <https://lincsbus.com/callconnect/>

⁶ <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/connecting-ireland/what-is-connecting-ireland/>

⁷ <https://www.interregeurope.eu/good-practices/hoppin-point-geel>

45. Members were of the view that appending or otherwise providing the full submission would help ensure that Cabinet had access to the detailed points raised by an established bus user group. The Committee therefore wished the submission to be available to Cabinet alongside other stakeholder and consultation evidence.

Recommendation 9: That the Council should ensure, when the Plan is submitted to Cabinet, that Oxon for Buses's full submission is included.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

46. The Committee intends to scrutinise the final proposals, probably in November, before they are submitted to Cabinet.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

47. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.'
48. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex:	Pro-forma Response Template
Background papers:	None
Other Documents:	None
Contact Officer:	Richard Doney Scrutiny Officer richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk

September 2026