

ADDRESS TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 22 APRIL ON ITEM 8

Mr Chairman, thank you for considering the Parish Councils' concerns about the Planning Department's performance. This is not about officers, but about processes, procedures and culture — especially the lack of urgency in progressing applications and in pressing other departments (notably Highways and Legal) to respond promptly and in considering the cumulative impact on local communities.

The Parish Councils' letters highlight many concerns, including repeat applications, changes that arguably depart from the intent of the original consent, limited enforcement of breaches of conditions, and consultation responses being overlooked, which risks OCC being vulnerable under the **Gunning Principles**.

It is disappointing that, after eight months, the committee is only being asked to consider an overview of the department's responsibilities, governance, performance and resourcing.

The overview is helpful in broad terms. It is strong on delegation, but weak on supervision, accountability, transparency and internal checks. However, It does not reflect the reality on the ground. As such, it goes no way towards addressing the parishes' concerns, so please look beyond the overview — either by establishing a working party with independent advice, or by asking Cabinet to commission an independent review.

Today I ask the committee to keep asking “why” — and to use the answers to drive improvements.

Why, for instance, given the statutory time limit of 13 to 16 weeks, has it:

- a. Needed eight consultations for one Section 73 application and seven for another?
- b. Taken 5 years 4 months to determine one case, 4 years 9 months another — and still left routing and Section 106 agreements outstanding eight months later?

Similar delays arise across the county (see my sheet, including Thrupp Farm, Sonning Quarry, Bunkers Hill–Shipton and Culham Weir). This also raises questions about paragraph 71 of the report and the “agreed extended period”.

On enforcement: Cllrs Constance, Webber and Snowden previously raised serious concerns about a lack of action. Officers have powers but are reluctant to use them. Again, the question is why, when other councils do?

For instance, FCC was found in blatant breach of a condition on the hinterland; no information was sought on how long it had persisted; the Contravention Notice was not made public; and approval of a retrospective application was then cited to justify no further enforcement.

Heidelberg was also in breach from December 2021 to September 2024 of the condition to cease operations by the end of 2021, yet no enforcement action was taken.

In summary, beneath the report's overview are worrying performance and enforcement issues. I urge the committee to examine these in detail in its role of challenging and improving performance.

Finally, do not accept the suggestion that you are unqualified to address them. What is required is common sense and business nous, which I am sure, from your varied experience, you can apply.

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21 April 2026