

Chapter 5: Buses in Oxford – solutions that could help services in the city, and “solutions” that won’t

Introduction

1. This chapter has two main sections. In the first section, we express strong doubts that Oxfordshire County Council’s congestion charge proposals will help improve bus services – mainly because there is little connection between the proposed congestion charge checkpoints, bus routes, and locations where congestion occurs. In the second section, we suggest improvements to bus services in Oxford, with a specific focus on park and ride services. We do so with the aim of offering practical ways of reducing car usage in Oxford, by proposing measures that seek to rectify genuine causes of congestion in the city.

Part one: The irrationality of Oxford’s congestion charge scheme as a method of delivering bus service improvements in Oxford

2. To recap: one of the stated justifications for Oxfordshire County Council’s proposed congestion charge scheme is to help it meet its target of reducing bus journey times in Oxford by 10%¹. As previously discussed, this objective was agreed by Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford’s main bus companies as part of a bid to secure electric bus funding under the “Zebra” scheme. Yet, as previously highlighted, two of the six proposed congestion charge sites – Hythe Bridge Street and Thames Street – currently have no bus services operating on them. Nor would it make sense to run any bus services on Thames Street, in particular. This is because a mainly bus-only street (Speedwell Street) already runs alongside Thames Street for much of its length, providing traffic-free passage for buses across this part of the city centre.

Illustration 5.1: Hythe Bridge Street, 14 July 2025, 8:15 – congestion charge location



¹ Oxfordshire County Council. Successful funding bid is set to bring 159 electric buses to Oxfordshire. 29 March 2022. Available [here](#).

Illustration 5.2: Thames Street, 14 July 2025, 7.55. Congestion charge location

3. Meanwhile, the free-flowing Marston Ferry Road and St Cross Road currently only run a handful of bus services along their (largely free-flowing) length. On these two roads, there is plenty of capacity to run extra bus services, without any additional restrictions on cars.

Illustration 5.3: Marston Ferry Road, 25 February 2025, 7:47am -congestion charge location

Illustration 5.4: St Cross Road, 23 June, 8:01am – congestion charge location

4. Hollow Way and St Clements are bus routes, proposed congestion charge ANPR checkpoints, and (sometimes) are busy with traffic. But, as we explained in chapter one, neither of these roads is congested to the extent that a 7am – 7pm, seven-day-per-week congestion charge becomes a proportionate policy response. For much of the day, our analysis based on Google Maps’ “typical traffic data” indicates that delays on St Clements can typically be counted in seconds, not minutes, mainly in one direction. At the worst periods of the evening rush hour, we have calculated that eastbound congestion in St Clements can typically be cleared in six minutes, due to the road’s short length. Hollow Way has a similar congestion profile. In Hollow Way, the average congestion clearance time travelling south towards Garsington Road is around 3.5 minutes.
5. Of course, these are averages, smoothed over an entire year. However, like the photos in this chapter – all taken during weekday rush hour during the state school term time – these findings do not indicate a year-round congestion emergency across the entire city.

Illustration 5.5: St Clements, 7 July 2025, 7.55am -congestion charge location

6. The lack of bus services on several of the proposed congestion charge checkpoint routes is an oddity in its own right. The rationale for the scheme becomes even more tenuous when Oxford's wider bus network is considered. If our provisional findings – shown below – are confirmed, it appears that, on a typical hour on a typical day, just 27% of Oxford's buses will operate on routes that run past a congestion charge checkpoint. In light of this low percentage, it is unclear how the congestion charge scheme will improve Oxford's bus network to the extent to which the scheme becomes a proportionate policy option.

Illustration 5.6: bus flows in a typical hour – congestion charge sites and other key locations in Oxford

Calculation of % bus flows (one way, per hour)

Congestion charge sites		Other congestion sites – no charge points	
• St Clements	• St Cross	• Headington Shops	• Botley Road
• 38	• 2	• 40	• 14
• Hollow Way	• Hythe Bridge Street	• Cowley Road	• Iffley Road
• 11	• 0	• 27	• 11
• Marston Ferry	• Thames Street	• Banbury Road	• Headley Way North
• 6	• 0	• 16	• 7
	• Total 57	• Woodstock Road	• Headley Way South
		• 15	• 10
		• Abingdon Road	• Total 155
		• 15	

Overall total 212, Congestion sites only 27% of total, St Clements is 66% of the congestion sites, 18% of the total

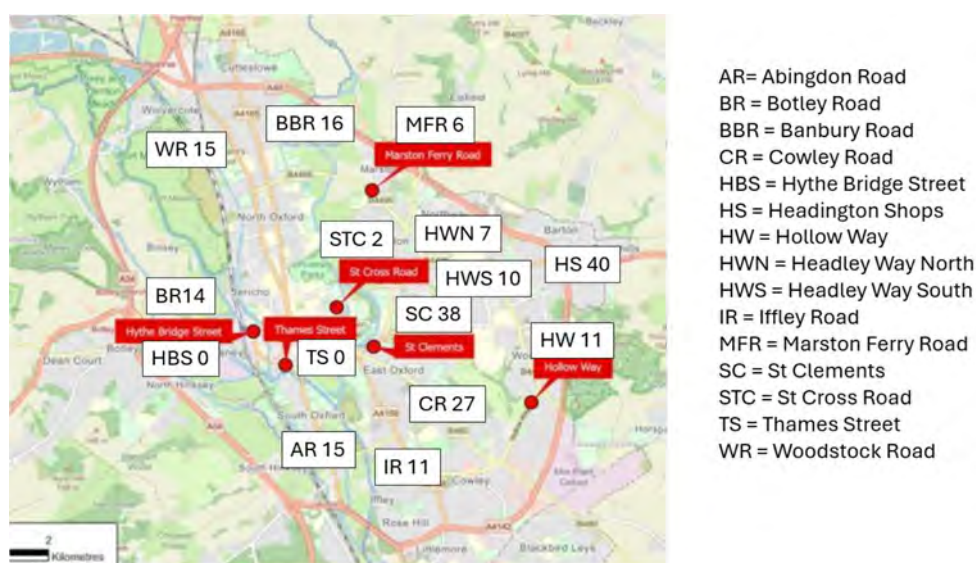
7. Notably, several major bus routes are not included in the proposed congestion charge scheme. Here, the standout example is Headington: with 40 bus services passing through this neighbourhood in a typical hour, Headington appears to be the logical place to begin, if one is taking an evidence-based approach to bus service improvement. Not only is Headington one of Oxford's most important bus passages, it also suffers from chronic peak-time congestion.

Illustration 5.7: London Road, Headington, 2 July, 8.08am – no congestion charge



8. We appreciate that sections of London Road in Headington benefit from bus lanes. However, these bus lanes disappear around the Headington shops area. As a result, bus services must compete with heavy traffic on a daily basis. And, because much of this traffic is hospital-related, the fall-off in congestion is less pronounced in Headington during the summer months, compared with elsewhere in the city. Yet, despite Headington being both a congestion hotspot and a major bus route, no congestion charge for this area is planned.

Illustrative 5.8: typical bus services each hour, each way, including on proposed congestion charge checkpoint locations



9. Meanwhile, Botley Road (14 buses per hour) has endured a wholesale curtailing of its bus routes for more than two years, as a result of the Botley Road closure². During this entire time, Oxfordshire County Council has elected not to intervene – it did the opposite, in fact. Yet suddenly, just months before the December 2025 deadline for delivering city-wide bus service time improvements, the council blindsided its entire population with a congestion charge proposal it had previously rejected as unworkable less than three years before.
10. Of course, we appreciate that curtailing access to Thames Street would undoubtedly improve the service on Abingdon Road, which has demonstrably deteriorated since the Botley Road was closed. But an equivalent observation can be made about bus services in Oxford and Cowley, which have been significantly harmed by Oxfordshire County Council's LTN policies. In a typical hour, far more buses use Cowley Road (27) than Abingdon Road (15) – yet no vehicular restrictions are proposed for Cowley Road – or improvements planned. Similarly, Iffley Road (11 buses per hour), a notorious congestion hotspot during the private school term, is not scheduled to have any new restrictions imposed on it, whereas the nearby St Clements will. Of course, the best way to improve bus services on all of these roads is not to introduce yet more restrictions on cars. Rather, it is to remove the LTNs.

² Network Rail. New programme launched to reopen Botley Road summer 2026. Available [here](#).

Illustration 5.9, Iffley Road, 26 June 2025, 8:09am - no congestion charge

11. What is more, as we explain in chapter six, it is plausible that the introduction of the congestion charge will cause significant economic harm to businesses across Oxford. Here, we argue it is the council's responsibility to consider the economic and social well-being of the entirety of Oxford and Oxfordshire, ahead of the narrow sectional economic interests of its bus companies, especially in response to a localised, time-limited issue affecting the bus companies' services.

12. Furthermore, in seeking to improve the bus services on Abingdon Road, the council's own modelling data suggests that displacement of traffic will occur in other locations across the bus network, particularly at Oxford's edges. It is predictable that bus services in this part of the city will suffer as a result. We have, for example, established that traffic levels are predicted to increase on Garsington Road (a road with at least six bus routes) by up to 25% as a direct result of the congestion charge being introduced³. This information was extracted from Councillor Andrew Gant via residents' questions, after the Ricardo analysis failed to provide impact data on this road in its evaluation report.

13. Ricardo's published modelling also suggests that traffic levels will increase by 5% on Marsh Lane, a road that is already at full capacity during the morning rush hour. This road connects Oxford city centre and the John Radcliffe Hospital via the number 14 bus route. Traffic is also predicted to increase on the Woodstock Road as a result of the congestion charge/traffic filters scheme near the Wolvercote roundabout. As a result, Oxfordshire County Council has switched the bus lane to a different carriageway ahead of the traffic filters launch⁴, to alleviate a predicted new congestion problem entirely of its own making.

³ Andrew Gant: written response to Mehmet Karakus, Meeting of Oxfordshire County Council, 8 July 2025, 10:30am. Response on file with author.

⁴ Oxfordshire County Council. Woodstock Road sustainable travel improvements. Available [here](#).

Illustration 5.10, Marsh Lane, 23 June 2025, 7.04am - no congestion charge**Conclusions**

14. We have tried, and failed, to comprehend how the proposed congestion charge scheme will help improve Oxford's bus services, beyond a narrow benefit delivered to a small number of bus routes close to Abingdon Road. We suspect that no such wider benefits can be demonstrated, on the basis that the proposed congestion charge "solution" is – fundamentally – ill-fitted to its stated purpose.

Part two: How improvements to park and ride could help actually relieve actual sources of traffic and congestion in Oxford.

15. In this section, we entirely disregard Oxfordshire County Council's proposed congestion charge proposal, in light of what we regard as very weak evidence justifying its deployment. Instead, this section explores how improved bus services might help alleviate actual, observed causes of congestion, as previously identified in chapters three and four. That is: hospital traffic and private school traffic.
16. The singular focus of this section is park and ride provision, rather than bus services more generally within the city. We focus on park and ride services in light of our previous findings: that a significant element of Oxford's traffic is caused by visitors based outside the city making point-to-point visits to locations on the city's edges. These types of journeys, especially those made regularly – i.e. by hospital staff⁵, private school pupils – potentially lend themselves to a modal shift from cars to buses.
17. Starting with hospital traffic and potential hospital patrons. Here, our proposals draw on established principles of process improvement. In our view, Oxford's park and ride offering is not currently delivering what a significant percentage of potential hospital patrons want.

⁵ Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. Healthy Travel Strategy: 2025 – 2027, A framework for travel strategy for the John Radcliffe. Acting CEO's forward. Available [here](#).

Reconnecting Oxford**Provisional report, subject to corrections**

18. This is due to:

- The highest frequency bus services running east-west, when we suspect most hospital staff and visitors tend to come from the county's major population centres in the north and south;
- The current north and south located park and ride services – Oxford Parkway in the north and Redbridge in the south are too infrequent, and too slow.

19. The current situation is one reason – we believe – why many drivers do not use park and ride services, and instead drive to their destinations in the city's outer edge – especially its hospital district. From every direction, park and ride is too slow. And, apart from Thornhill, the services are also too infrequent.

20. We believe that “doing what the customer wants” entails providing many more bus services from the directions they are travelling from, i.e. from the north and from the south. We assume that hospitals will have access to extensive data, both in relation to their own workforce and the home addresses of their patients: we believe this data should be evaluated, to the maximum extent permitted by data protection laws, to help devise park and ride services that match provision with demand.

21. We believe that park and ride can work, and enable modal shift, if it is significantly revamped to meet the needs of staff and visitors to the Headington hospitals. Here, a key metric should be that the service should match, or improve on, typically point-to-point driving times.

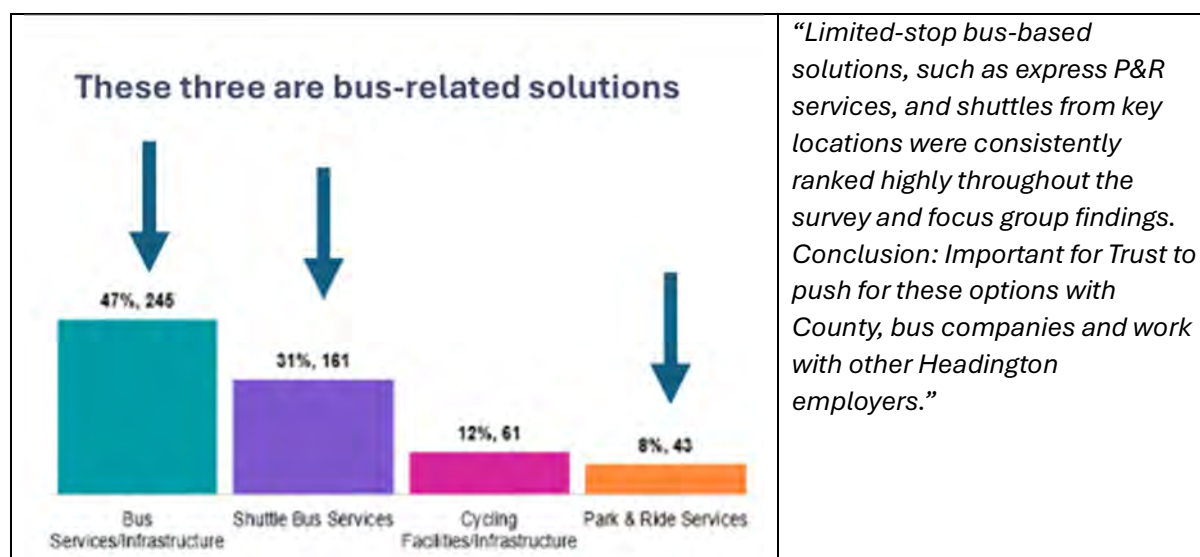
Illustration 5.11: Our proposal for a comprehensive park and ride hospital service, using Oxford's ring road



New focus on delivering high frequency, high volume bus services using all the Park and Ride sites to cover the routes from the North and South, including Seacourt P&R for the A420 from the Southwest

22. Agreeing with the findings of evidence collected by Oxfordshire University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (OUH) (below), we support the deployment of express park and ride services, where such services might be used by hospital staff, patients, and members of the public alike. Where demand mainly comes from hospital staff, express shuttle bus services should be offered, where the capacity offered closely matches demand. We do not advocate a complete modal shift away from cars, on the basis that such a policy would be unrealistic, in light of shift lengths and distances to work often travelled.

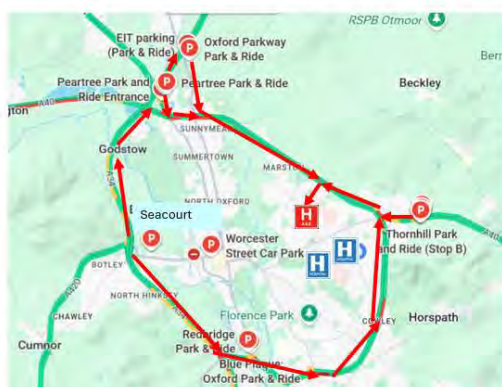
Illustration 5.12: Delivering what people want - service that might prompt OUH staff to ditch their cars



23. To make the modal shift truly attractive, a key objective should be to make it quicker than driving. How might that be achieved? Here, our principal recommendation is to connect all of Oxford's parks and rides to its Headington hospitals via the ring road, which is generally the fastest road in the city. We do not believe it is conducive to an express service for it to travel through suburban Oxford roads in Marston and Headington, many of which now have 20mph speed limits. We also advocate, where helpful, making use of the Barton Park bus gate, where Foxwell Drive in Northway meets Oxford's northern bypass ring road.

Illustration 5.13: Proposed hospital express park and ride services using the ring road and the Barton Park Bus / Northway bus gate

Hospital Express P&R using the Ring Road and the Northway Bus Gate



Using the bus gate delivers big time savings on driving to the hospital via the main entrance and will reduce congestion on the routes inside the ring road

24. Using Google Map times, we expect to see a reduction of roughly 30-60% in travel times between the park and ride sites and the John Radcliffe Main entrance bus stop, by adopting this approach. As table 5.14 below shows, a journey via this route will take approximately nine minutes, compared with around 15 minutes currently. Faster trip times also mean that more bus trips can be made every hour, generating more capacity, more revenue, and the service reliability that customers require.

Table 5.14: Hospital express park and ride to main entrance bus stops using Barton Park bus gate – travel time estimate

Hospital Express P&R to Main Entrance bus stop using Saxon Way entrance - travel time estimates

		Timetable time from P&R to Main Entrance (bus no.)							From P&R inc walk								
Express P&R from	RCO Estimate to Saxon Way entrance	400/14	400	600	X3	X32	H2	700	8	Walk	Cycle	Drive to main entrance	Time saving RCO estimate versus driving	Time saving %	Time saving RCO estimate versus best bus time	Time saving %	
Thornhill	9	26	16				25		23	43	11	10	1	10%	7	44%	
Oxford Parkwa	12							23		94	23	12	0	0%	11	48%	
Seacourt	21	52								80	25	21	0	0%	31	60%	
Redbridge	20			60	30	30				78	22	18	-2	-11%	10	33%	
Peartree	14						31			87	23	13	-1	-8%	17	55%	
Eynsham	20									195	46	20	0	0%	N/A		

Time savings range from a minimum of 33% for Redbridge P&R to 60% for Seacourt, with Thornhill at 44%.

Short duration services will require less buses and enable high frequency while delivering higher capacity every hour

25. We appreciate the potential challenges of opening up the Northway bus gate to frequent park and ride services from the Ring Road, not least because this would involve additional buses passing through a residential area. However, unless these challenges can be overcome, we do not believe that park and services will be able to match point-to-point driving times, our main benchmark for success.
26. We also recognise the need to make such services commercially viable. Running faster buses, point to point, with only two stops – the P&R site and the hospital – should yield better fleet utilisation, and higher customer volumes and revenues.
27. We suggest that additional park and ride capacity might need to be created, located directly alongside the ring road, in close proximity to Oxford's hospitals. As a low cost interim measure, we suggest exploring the possibility of using part of the BMW car parks, parking capacity on the Oxford Business Park in Cowley, and the disused car park near Cowley Tesco, on the Oxford Retail Park. We cannot understand why land immediately adjacent to the Barton Park bus gate, off the ring road, has not been secured as a hospital car park.
28. To make park and ride a viable option for Oxford's hospital workforce, capacity issues need to be addressed. Currently, park and ride services arriving at Oxford's hospitals around the time of the 7am / 7:30am shift change do not have sufficient capacity to make park and ride a viable option at scale. We illustrate this point in table 5.2 below. With 483 seats available

Reconnecting Oxford**Provisional report, subject to corrections**

for the 7am shift and 414 seats available for the 7.30am shift, we suspect there is a large shortfall in seat capacity between what is currently provided and what is needed. Not being able to get on a bus ahead of a shift start due to capacity constraints is an obvious disincentive to attempt to use the service again.

Table 5.2: Current capacity constraints at park and ride services during hospital shift change over period

		Major	Minor	Scheduled time to Main entrance (minutes)	Departure time to 7.00 shift start (minutes)	No. of buses arriving 20 minutes before 7.00am shift start (allowing for walking 400 & 8)	Seat capacity for the 7am shift	Departure time to 7.30 shift start (minutes)	No. of buses arriving 20 minutes before 7.30am shift start	Seat capacity for the 7.30am shift
Parkway	100/700	2	17	26	39	1	69	33	1	69
Pear Tree		N/A	N/A	N/A						
Rail Station	14	5		27	35	1	69		0	
Redbridge	600	8	32	60						
Redbridge	X3	5	29	38						
Redbridge	X32	4	16	20	42	1	69	45	1	69
Redbridge Total		9								
Seacourt		N/A	N/A	N/A						
Thornhill	H2	6	18	25						
Thornhill	600	1	9	14	30	1	69	30	1	69
Headington Shops	400	1		8	43	3	207	43	3	207
Other buses	ST2									
Average					38	7	483		6	414

29. An acute lack of current park and ride capacity is another reason why we believe it is irrational for Oxfordshire County Council to introduce a congestion charge now, without first putting in place suitable mitigation measures. As previously stated, we estimate that around 80% of the John Radcliffe staff and – by extrapolation – 80% of the 19,000-20,000 staff who work at the Headington hospitals, live outside the city. For every 1,000 members of staff, we estimate 14.5 double-decker buses will be required, assuming they are fully loaded. However, at present, there is approximately half that capacity around the start time of a typical hospital shift. Modal shift cannot happen if there is not sufficient capacity in place.

30. Turning now to those travelling to Oxford's Headington hospitals from the south. We support measures to curtail the southern route traffic flow via Donnington Bridge, Iffley Road and the Plain – including encouraging mapping software, such as Google Maps, to offer this route.

31. Oxfordshire County Council's preferred solution is, of course, to place a congestion charge checkpoint on St Clements. But, as we previously discussed in chapter four, this approach is likely to be ineffective, for two main reasons. Firstly, many staff arrive at Oxford's hospitals before 7am. As a result, the St Clements congestion charge filter will only affect outbound journeys. This has the potential to put even more pressure on Headington, as drivers seek to avoid the charge when travelling home from the hospital. Secondly, we believe that many visitors to the hospitals will continue to travel via St Clements, especially if they are only occasional visitors to the city, because their permits will allow them to do so.

32. In our view, the most pragmatic approach to this issue is to incentivise, though carrots and not sticks, regular visitors to the John Radcliffe from the south to use an express park and ride service from Redbridge, making the service more attractive than travelling by car. This service would free up capacity for those staff and patients who cannot realistically make such a shift, and should not be forced to try.

33. The three rules of adding value are

- Do what the customer wants
- Get it right the first time
- Deliver change and transformation

34. We believe that providing fast and frequent park and ride services, which patrons want to use, could result in a significant modal shift – enough to reduce congestion around the John Radcliffe Hospital considerably. To succeed, the best possible routes must be offered, at the best price and at the right capacity, to ensure the service is both attractive to users and commercially viable. By doing the above, we believe it is possible to finally deliver the change and transformation that Headington's hospitals need.

35. Moving now onto Oxford's schools – and, in particular, its private schools, which tend to have large catchment areas. Helpfully, both of Oxford's private school clusters – in north Oxford and Headington / central are within convenient access of two of Oxford's park and rides – Peartree in the case of North Oxford, Thornhill in the case of Headington / central Oxford.

36. We have identified three main challenges that currently make driving children to school a rational default option, compared with park and ride.

- The children's age. This is obviously an intractable problem, largely immune to policy interventions.
- The fact that the park and ride services are not currently open to school buses; only now is Oxfordshire County Council tentatively considering this option.
- The fact that several conventional bus services close to the Peartree have total journey lengths that some will not find appealing.

37. To explain this last point. Table 5.3 below sets out the total journey times from Peartree park and ride on a typical weekday morning to north Oxford's main North Oxford private schools, at approximately 8am. A typical bus journey is fairly short, reflecting the short distance and the lack of traffic in the area at this time of the morning. More problematic is the walking time. On occasions, this can take far longer to complete than the bus journey itself. Walking times of around 10 minutes are unlikely to be problematic for older children, such as pupils at schools such as d'Overbroeck's (age range 11 – 18) or St Edward's (age range 13 – 18). However, they may well become so after this time period, especially for walking distances of more than 15 minutes. Public bus use – in general – may also be unviable for schools with younger intakes, such as Summer Fields School (age range 4-13), or Dragon School (4-13).

38. In light of the above, we suggest two possible options should be considered, both utilising Pear Tree park and ride. Firstly, the operators of this site (i.e. Oxford City Council) should consider opening up the facility for school buses, to allow schools to operate their own peak time, point-to-point, shuttle buses between Pear Tree and their main teaching north Oxford sites. Secondly, in light of the (relatively) close proximity of the schools to each other, consideration should also be given to the possibility of the viability of running a generic shuttle bus, visiting most schools in quick succession – in a manner similar to the one already in operation involving Headington Rye and Magdalen College School⁶. Here, Oxfordshire County Council could potentially play a convening role in securing cooperation

⁶ Headington Rye Oxford. New Joint Bus Partnership. 13 January 2023. Available [here](#).

between schools to launch this service, if it were deemed more viable than individual schools running their own shuttle bus service.

Table 5.3: Journey times – bus and walking – from Pear Tree park and ride to Oxford’s main North Oxford private schools

School	Bus service and bus journey times in minutes	Walking time (either end)
d'Overbroeck's Oxford	300 (9 minutes); S3 (5 minutes); H2 (8 minutes); X4 (3 minutes)	300 (walk 12 minutes); S3 (11 minutes); H2 (16 minutes); X4 (21 minutes).
St Edward's School	300 (9 minutes); S2 (3 minutes); S3 (6 minutes).	300 (6 minutes); S2 (16 minutes); S3 (6 minutes).
Summer Fields School	300 (9 minutes); S3 (7 minutes); H2 (12 minutes); X4 (5 minutes).	300 (9 minutes); S3 (13 minutes); H2 (17 minutes); H4 (22 minutes).
Oxford High School	6 (7 minutes); 300 (9 minutes); S2 (7 minutes); S3 (11 minutes)	6 (26 minutes); 300 (18 minutes); (23 minutes); S3 (14 minutes),
Wychwood School	300 (15 minutes); S2 (9 minutes) S3 (13 minutes); X4 (9 minutes)	300 (7 minutes); S2 (19 minutes); S3 (10 minutes); X4 (22 minutes).
Dragon School	300 (15 minutes); S2 (9 minutes); S3 (13 minutes); X4 (9 minutes)	300 (12 minutes); S2 (23 minutes); S3 (14 minutes); X4 (26 minute).

39. In the East Oxford / Headington area, we are aware of the existing bus partnership between Headington Rye and Magdalen College School⁷. Whether this service would benefit any further from an additional drop-off and pickup point at Thornhill park and ride, we defer to the interested parties in terms of whether the scheme is needed – noting that the former Oxford Schools Bus Partnership often required pickups to take place near, but not within, park and ride facilities⁸. However, should the key stakeholders express interest in this option, we suggest Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council should both actively facilitate such an opening up. We do so for four main reasons: firstly, running such a service could take pressure of Iffley Road, which is highly congested in the mornings during private school term times; secondly, the route between Thornhill and Headington Rye / Magdalen College School is direct, taking a maximum of 25 minutes in total; third, a significant element of it has the benefit of either bus lanes (in Headington) or quiet roads (Headington Hill). Thirdly, the age range of Magdalen College School pupils (7-18) – specifically – make independent travel a viable option, especially for its older pupils.

Conclusions

40. This chapter starkly demonstrates the difference between evidence-based policy making and policy-based evidence making. In our proposals to improve Oxford’s park and ride, our starting point is that Oxford’s hospitals are demonstrably a significant cause of traffic and congestion in Oxford, and that workable solutions should be developed to overcome this

⁷ <https://www.thisisoxfordshire.co.uk/news/25335043.magdalen-college-school-hits-back-congestion-charge-claim/>

⁸ Oxford School Bus Partnership. Former routes available [here](#).

problem. The focus of these proposals is to offer an enhanced service that is attractive to a defined potential client base, because it is quicker and more convenient than using a car.

41. A similar principle is applied to our proposals regarding private school park and ride access: first, we have sought to establish what appears to be sub-optimal about the existing provision (walking distances may be too long). Then, we suggest how this specific problem might plausibly be rectified by offering solutions that key stakeholders may want, and can be cost-effectively delivered. The fact that private schools previously picked up pupils near, but outside, park and ride facilities, under a previous scheme indicates to us that our proposal is worth exploring.
42. In stark contrast, Oxfordshire County Council's congestion charge proposals appear to be a policy "solution" that does not withstand the most basic of scrutiny – namely, that the proposal will impose a congestion charge on several key arterial roads that carry few, or no buses, and are not congested for much of the day even if they do– while simultaneously not rolling out the scheme on major bus routes that are also congestion hot spots. Worse, the council's "solution" is highly likely to harm bus services elsewhere in Oxford via traffic displacement, while also harming Oxford's wider economy. Oxford's residents deserve better than this.