

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET**

**18 November 2025**

### **OxRail 2040: Plan for Rail**

### **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 OxRail 2040 (henceforth, 'the Plan'), which set out the Council's plan to improve rail transport and connectivity across the County over the next 15 years.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Place, Environment and Climate Action, Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place, Pete Brunskill, Rail Development Lead, and James Gagg, Team Leader, for attending the meeting and responding to questions.

## SUMMARY

5. The Cabinet Member and Director of Economy and Place introduced the OxRail 2040 report, emphasising its ambitious scope, year-long development, and the exceptional number of consultation responses it received. Widely supported, the Plan aimed to outline Oxfordshire's connectivity needs and build a strong investment case, with a focus on achievable outcomes. The recent government approval for the Cowley branch line was noted as a key milestone. The Rail Development Lead highlighted intensified planning efforts since June, including collaboration with WSP consultancy, broad engagement across the council and rail industry, and significant stakeholder support. The recent release of the Government's Railways Bill was mentioned as aligning with the Plan's aspirations and providing future opportunities for mayoral authorities in rail development.
6. In its consideration of the item the Committee explored a breadth of topics, including the degree of support for the proposals by the rail industry, impacts on housing viability and modal shift, biodiversity net gain, engagement, updates, and refinements to the Plan, as well as disability access around stations.
7. The Committee makes five recommendations to Cabinet which broadly cluster around comments over the Carterton-Witney-Oxford Mass Rapid Transit, opportunities for housing development, ways to support modal shift, and a suggestion on how further to clarify public expectations of the Plan.

## OBSERVATION

8. The Committee was addressed by Charlie Maynard, MP, the Member of Parliament for Witney, speaking in favour of a Carterton-Witney-Oxford railway. It was suggested that the wording of the OxRail 2040 plan gave insufficient recognition to the amount of work already completed on the project's feasibility and cost-effectiveness and it was requested that amendments were made to the wording of the Plan to reflect this, and to be more ambitious in the phasing of its delivery. Two recommended changes were put forward. The Committee did not consider it necessary to put these forward as formal recommendations, considering it most appropriate for the Cabinet member to request the changes to be made if she considered it so minded. However, the Committee is content to note them as observations.
  - a) *Replace on p. 80 the sentence "We will also begin exploring the case for a Carterton–Witney–Oxford Mass Rapid Transit system (P3.05), working to identify the most suitable solution to enhance public transport access to the west of our County" with "We will continue to explore the case for a Carterton–Witney–Oxford Mass Rapid Transit system (P3.05), to identify the most suitable solution to enhance public transport access to the west of our County."*
  - b) *Replace on p.37 "we will continue to develop options for medium - to longer-term mass rapid transit (which may include rail) for this corridor to identify*

*deliverable plans and financing mechanisms for its implementation (P3.05)” with “we will continue to develop options for medium- to longer-term mass rapid transit (which may include rail) for this corridor to identify deliverable plans and financing mechanisms for its implementation potentially within this plan period (P3.05)”*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Carterton-Witney-Oxford Mass Rapid Transit

9. It is important to recognise, however, whilst the Committee would be content with the textual amendments proposed above, that the Plan commits to ‘a longer-term mass rapid transit corridor (which may include rail)’. Within that caveat is the implication that it equally may not; the Committee was informed that there are strong reasons in favour of rail, but that feasibility studies had also identified that there are also notable challenges.
10. There is a degree of urgency around establishing which solution will be pursued by the fact that West Oxfordshire District Council is in the process of developing its Local Plan, which identifies where it expects to see new development to 2043. The location and density of development is very closely linked to the ability of transport to service it, so clarity on this matter is vital. As such, the Committee welcomed the news that the Council has already commissioned further work to identify its preferred mass transit solution. It wishes to stress to Cabinet that much of the value of this work will come from giving West Oxfordshire District Council a clearer idea on which to base their Local Plan. Consequently, it is critical that this work is undertaken early enough to be understood and incorporated into the wider proposed Local Plan.
11. It is stressed as part of this recommendation that much work has already been undertaken previously over the past twenty years as to how to reduce congestion on the A40. It is specifically hoped that this work will be referenced and engaged with, rather than lost or re-undertaken.

**Recommendation 1: That the Council should undertake sufficient work to identify its preferred options and feasibility for mass rapid transit solutions for West Oxfordshire in time to allow that information to be used meaningfully and to be incorporated into the West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2043**

### Housing

12. Whilst the location of railway lines (or other forms of rapid mass transit) have implications for housing and development at a strategic level, there are also opportunities in the reverse direction: developing unused land owned by railway companies near to stations for housing. The Committee queried how far this had been investigated. Members were gladdened to hear not only of the Council's openness to this possibility, particularly in Banbury, but also for the support at a national level with the launch of Platform4, which seeks to

develop 40,000 new homes on rail-owned brownfield sites over the coming decade.

13. The Committee appreciates that the OxRail 2040 is not a housing plan. Nonetheless, homes near to railway stations are less car-reliant and often bring people into town and city centres, both of which are desirable and consistent with the Council's strategic plan. As such, the Committee would value the inclusion of explicit reference to those areas it intends to facilitate housing development on rail-owned land.

**Recommendation 2: That the Council should identify the areas of opportunity for development of housing near railway lines and the steps it intends to take to enable delivery as part of the Plan.**

#### Modal Shift

14. As the Plan states, "Rail is at the heart of a zero-emissions transport system." In order to achieve decarbonisation targets, the reductions of road journeys in the Local Connectivity and Travel Plan and the Council's Strategic objectives for a greener, fairer and healthier Oxfordshire it is necessary to deliver modal shift.
15. The Committee does appreciate that the OxRail Plan, in the same way it is not a housing plan, is also not a fully-integrated transport plan. Equally, however, despite being fundamental to a zero-emissions transport system, rail on its own is not sufficient to deliver modal shift. That is to be found with multi-modal integration, where – for example – people can ride their bicycle to the station, catch the train into Oxford, and then take a bus on to their workplace. The work in Didcot to make the station a mobility hub was highlighted to the Committee, and is the driving rationale behind the development of the Oxfordshire Metro concept.
16. An observation by the Committee is that, despite this recognition of the importance of multi-modal transport, the maps provided focus only on rail routes. If these were to be overlaid with key bus routes also it would more accurately reflect and embed the potential of the integrated network that the Plan is working towards.

**Recommendation 3: That the Council should include maps within the OxRail 2040 Plan to illustrate the potential of an integrated transport network by overlaying major bus routes onto projected rail maps.**

17. Modal shift is often thought about in terms of people, but, as the Plan rightly recognises, goods also can also be moved off the roads. Freight delivered by rail, however, does require additional infrastructure to transfer it to roads for the final leg of its journey. The Committee is keen that suitable locations are identified in the upcoming revisions of Local Plans in Oxfordshire to ensure that this necessary infrastructure can be delivered.

**Recommendation 4: That the Council works with the local City and District Councils to identify suitable locations for land to be allocated to the infrastructure required to support greater modal shift towards railway freight.**

#### Plan Clarity

18. A final point concerns how the Plan itself will be received. The length of time taken to deliver rail initiatives, and the complexity from having so many stakeholders – from National Rail to rail companies to the different tiers of local authorities, to landowners – is perhaps better understood within the Council than by the general public. There exists a danger, therefore, that the very significant amount of work referenced in the Plan may be interpreted as imminent commitments to deliver by the Council. The Committee would wish to see fuller information around where responsibility for the deliverables in the Plan primarily lie, the nature of the Council's involvement - either as the lead, or simply an influencer or enabler, the dependencies, and a sense of timescale. Explaining these clearly within the Plan would ground public expectations of the Council and the project deliverables within a realistic structure and potentially avoid confusion or disappointment.

**Recommendation 5: That the Council should clarify within the Plan where primary responsibility for the key deliverables sits, what the Council's involvement is, the dependencies on which they rest, and an assessment of likely timescales.**

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

19. The Committee does not anticipate revisiting this topic again during this municipal year.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

20. 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.
21. 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

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