



PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Wednesday, 24 September 2025 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.57 pm.

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Liam Walker - in the Chair
Councillor Bethia Thomas (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Thomas Ashby
Councillor Chris Brant
Councillor Laura Gordon
Councillor Emily Kerr
Councillor Lesley McLean
Councillor Susanna Pressel
Councillor Leigh Rawlins

**Other Members in
Attendance:**

Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council
Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet member for Transport
Management
Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet member for Finance, Property, and
Transformation

Officers:

Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways
Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Transformation
Sean Rooney, Head of Highway Maintenance and Road
Safety
Paul Wilson, Operational Manager (Operations)
Jack Wheeler, Senior Biodiversity Officer
Charlottle Knowles, Marketing and Campaigns Manager
Caroline Coyne, Project Manager
Katharine Broomfield, Technical Lead – Bus Service
Improvement
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.

41/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

There were none.

42/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

43/25 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Committee **APPROVED** the minutes of the meeting held on 27 August 2025 as a true and accurate record.

44/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

45/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 5)

Paul Fermer, the Director of Environment and Highways, gave a brief oral update on progress of recommendations to which Cabinet had previously responded.

It was reported that the recommendations had been taken into account in finalising the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Biodiversity Action Plan, with both soon to be submitted to Cabinet.

Given the time critical nature of some of the Committee's recommendations submitted to Cabinet on 10 September relating to the congestion charge, the Committee requested an earlier response than the legal maximum of two months.

The Committee **NOTED** the action and recommendation tracker.

46/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS

(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet responses to the Transport Working Group Report recommendations.

The Committee **AGREED** an interest in monitoring the progress of these recommendations.

47/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda No. 7)

The Committee **AGREED** the proposed work programme.

A member encouraged Officers and the chair to prioritise scheduling the most important or contentious issues, such as policy decisions, at the beginning of meetings.

It was noted that the chairman of Sutton Courtenay Parish Council was expected to address the Committee when it considered the item on Minerals and Waste Management.

48/25 VERGE AND VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

(Agenda No. 8)

The Committee invited Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet member for Transport Management, to present the report and also invited Paul Fermer, Director of Environment, Highways & Transport, Sean Rooney, Head of Highway Maintenance and Road Safety, Paul Wilson, Operational Manager (Operations), Jack Wheeler, Senior Biodiversity Officer, and Charlotte Knowles, Marketing and Campaigns Manager, to attend and to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet member for Transport Management introduced the verge and vegetation management, highlighting that verge management was a specific part of the Committee's remit to be viewed in the context of wider biodiversity and planning policies. The Head of Highway Maintenance and Road Safety explained that the report reviewed current practices across the county, described the established processes and the close collaboration within environment teams.

The Committee raised the following questions and comments:

- The amount paid by the Council for verge management and the timing of the last review of the payment rate. It was clarified that payments to parish and town councils amounted to approximately £342,000 per year, with the rate for urban grass cutting set at a flat £0.10 per square metre. This rate had not been reviewed for eight to ten years, despite occasional requests for an increase. The overall cost had remained stable owing to a reduction in the number of cuts, moving from two per year to a single cut as recommended in the current policy. The possibility of a rate review was tied to the annual budget-setting process, where all service costs and charges were considered, but affordability was emphasised.

It was stated that parish and town councils could undertake grass cutting themselves on county land, and there were arrangements in place for the County Council to provide funding for this. The payment had been a flat rate for many years, and parishes could supplement this with their own funds if needed.

- What support was provided to parish and town councils and how communication was managed to ensure proper delivery of verge management, and how residents were informed about the balance between environmental impact and safety. The Head of Highway Maintenance and Road Safety and the Marketing and Campaigns Manager explained that the Council published the cutting programme and policy on its website which enabled residents to access relevant information. Communication with parish and town councils, as well as local divisional members, was handled directly by the engagement team, who also supported elected members to promote the programme within their communities. Issues raised by residents, through FixMyStreet, were addressed by the operational team.
- Whether it made sense to prioritise maintenance on key cycle routes and if the policy already addressed this, as well as the role of FixMyStreet in reporting issues. Officers explained that active travel routes had been prioritised for maintenance, especially with additional funding, and that visibility and safety were

the main considerations. The maintenance programme gave early attention to these routes, and, in years with high growth, a second cut could be arranged if needed. However, due to the variable nature of vegetation growth, it was advised that members and residents should report specific issues via FixMyStreet, particularly when they posed a safety hazard.

- The sufficiency of an annual cut. The Head of Highway Maintenance and Road Safety, and Senior Biodiversity Officer, clarified that the move to a single annual cut was a deliberate policy decision to enhance biodiversity, allowing wildflowers and mature verges to flourish.

It was emphasised that safety remained the overriding priority. Where safety and biodiversity conflicted, safety would take precedence, particularly regarding visibility splays and key active travel routes. However, the Committee was advised that allowing verges to grow could help reduce verge erosion by keeping vehicles more centrally on rural roads, and in some cases, additional vegetation might slow traffic, potentially improving safety.

- Clarity on rural concerns and nuances of biodiversity priorities, including how verge cutting interacted with hedges, the impact on verge erosion, and whether ecological outcomes such as wildlife support and edge erosion mitigation had been quantified. The Senior Biodiversity Officer explained that the approach to verge and hedge management depended on the specific habitat and legal responsibilities, with verges and hedges treated according to their own ecological considerations.
- What additional efforts were being made on council-owned land to increase biodiversity and raise awareness. Officers answered that there was agreement on the importance of identifying and celebrating best practice sites, improving communication both internally and externally, and ensuring that council-owned spaces, such as library verges, were managed to support biodiversity. It was also noted that there was a need to coordinate internally to prevent biodiversity initiatives from being undermined, such as wildflower areas being accidentally mown, and to better publicise these efforts to the community.
- Whether the Council was working with national landscape boards to communicate messages and fulfil its duties, and whether the terminology in documents should be updated from "areas of outstanding natural beauty" to "national landscapes." The Senior Biodiversity Officer answered that the council had a landscape officer who contributed to the biodiversity action framework, ensuring that duties to national landscapes were considered and that work was being done closely with these boards in the designation and management of roadside nature reserves and other verge management activities.

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

- That the Council should increase communications, consultation, and engagement about the benefits for biodiversity of verge and vegetation managements to ensure that members and residents, as well as parish and town councils

- That the Council should commit to progressing the digitisation of an online platform setting out the status of verges and vegetation across the county;
- That the Council should explore the possibility of increasing the number of places where 'cut and pile' is undertaken;
- That the Council should undertake a review of the amount paid to parish and town councils to assess whether it would be appropriate to increase the amount;
- That the Council should commit to the possibility of a second cut when weather conditions have resulted in unexpected

49/25 PART NIGHT LIGHTING CONSULTATION

(Agenda No. 9)

The Committee invited Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council, Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet member for Transport Management, to present the report and invited Paul Fermer, Director of Environment, Highways & Transport, and Caroline Coyne, Project Manager, to attend and to answer the Committee's questions.

The Leader explained that the Council had introduced a street lighting and illumination policy in 2022, and, in November 2023, a framework was published by the then Cabinet member for Environment. The Leader noted that the way the framework was published had caused public concern, especially regarding safety when switching off lights at night, so the council decided not to proceed and instead sought further public engagement to understand both concerns and benefits, such as improved dark skies for biodiversity and nature recovery in some areas, and safety concerns in others. She highlighted consultation results, which showed support for part night lighting, and she emphasised that the proposal included exemptions for areas where it would not be suitable, to be considered at the next cabinet meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Transport Management described the process as a good example of the council listening to feedback and acting on it. He pointed out that about half of comparable councils had adopted similar policies and stressed that the Council's approach required active support from the local county Councillor and other elected bodies for any area to be considered for part night lighting. He also noted that there was a list of exemptions, such as large urban areas like Oxford, which would not be eligible.

The Committee raised the following questions and comments:

- Whether towns, such as Banbury and Witney, would be exempt from part night lighting, and what the basis was for deciding exemptions beyond Oxford. The Cabinet members, and officers, clarified that Oxford was given as an example, but that other large towns would also be unlikely to qualify due to the set exemptions, with eligibility determined on a case-by-case basis.

It was explained that the process would only proceed where both the community and local elected members supported it. County councillors could get involved by engaging with their communities, submitting requests to the street lighting team, and participating in scheme design and further consultation, following a process similar to the 20 mile an hour scheme. Final decisions would be made through the Cabinet member decision process.

- How the process would work with parish councils and whether communities would be properly engaged to consider the impact of the part night lighting strategy, including support for groups such as shift workers. The Cabinet Member confirmed that, following lessons learned from previous projects, the Council would prompt parish and town councils to ensure they had consulted their residents and considered all relevant groups before making a request. The engagement team and street lighting officers would offer support, guidance, and prompts to help councils identify and address the needs of different user groups, ensuring a thorough and inclusive consultation process.
- Whether the strategy considered not just switching off streetlights but also adjusting their brightness, and whether the use of cats eyes on roads had been explored as an alternative where lighting was reduced. It was explained that dimming and trimming of lights were already part of the approach, not just complete switch-off. It was also confirmed that the Council was participating in a national trial using enhanced cats' eyes and improved road lining to compensate for reduced street lighting, with positive recognition for this work.
- How residents' opinions were sought and considered, including who the policy was ultimately for, and what would happen were the county councillor and the parish or town council to disagree. The Leader and Cabinet Member explained that the policy required agreement from both the parish or town council and the county councillor for part night lighting to proceed; without both, it would not go ahead. However, it was noted that, in practice, there could be negotiation and, in some cases, residents' views might override those of the councillor. It was emphasised that consultation responses were carefully reviewed to ensure they reflected the views of local residents, as the policy was intended for those living in the affected areas, not just those passing through.
- Why things went wrong the previous year when the part night lighting proposal was first brought forward. The Leader stated that the paper had been published before other cabinet members had seen it, and it did not sufficiently highlight the positives or address residents' concerns. As a result, it was withdrawn and a more thorough engagement process was undertaken. Officers added that there had been shortcomings in assembling a diverse project team and in conducting a detailed equality impact assessment, which, combined with political challenges, led to the initial failure. Lessons were learned, and a very different approach was adopted for the revised proposal.
- Plans for LED lights, their impact on biodiversity and insects, and the funding and costs associated with implementing part night lighting. The Director of Environment and Highways explained that the LED programme had been largely delivered, with careful consideration given to the wavelength and colour of light to

minimise negative effects on biodiversity. It was noted that further research was ongoing at a national level.

Regarding funding, it was stated that part night lighting initiatives would need to be funded by the local communities, as the council did not have a dedicated programme for this; however, the possibility of council investment was described as a live discussion, and some schemes could be cost neutral depending on savings achieved.

- How plans would affect suburbs on the edge of towns and the issue of light pollution spilling into the countryside, as well as what could be done regarding automatic and sensor lights. The Director of Environment and Highways and the Project Manager explained that the Council's asset management system allowed for a detailed review of streetlights and their locations, enabling nuanced decisions based on exemption lists and specific routes, such as those to train stations. Each scheme was considered on a case-by-case basis, with close collaboration with parish or town councils. Regarding sensor lights, it was stated that the Council aimed to be innovative and considered sensors where appropriate, particularly as part of replacement and maintenance programmes, but widespread use was limited by affordability.
- The matter of funding for part night lighting implementation, potential future council commitments, and payback periods for various schemes was addressed. It was clarified that, at this time, any implementation costs would be borne by scheme applicants; however, the policy allows for the possibility of future Council funding through the standard budget-setting process. Payback periods were noted to differ by scheme type: rural schemes averaged 6.7 years, residential suburban schemes 5.4 years, and urban schemes 1.5 years, with the latter being unlikely to be achieved in practice.

The Committee requested that the wording of paragraph 5 of the Cabinet report be reviewed in relation to funding so as to reflect the possibility that funding could hypothetically be available in the future.

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

- That the Council should ensure it engages fully with town and parish councils to ensure that the needs of local communities are considered when applications for part-night lighting are made.

The Committee paused at 11:35 and resumed at 11:45.

50/25 FUTURE BUS REGULATIONS OPTIONS (Agenda No. 10)

The Committee had invited Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet member for Transport Management, to present the report and invited Paul Fermer, Director of Environment, Highways & Transport, and Katharine Broomfield, Technical Lead – Bus Service Improvement, to attend and to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet member for Transport Management introduced the Future Bus Regulations options item explaining that, in anticipation of a general election and possible changes in government policy, the Council had commissioned a report to explore different models of bus ownership. He noted that the Government had introduced a bus bill, which was progressing through Parliament and affected the process for applying for various bus ownership models. Four options were considered, and the consultants were tasked with investigating each rather than recommending a specific one. The preferred option, Enhanced Partnership Plus (EP+), was chosen mainly due to timing, as franchising would take too long to implement before the Council's expected reorganisation. He emphasised that the decision was based on common sense and referenced the importance of local context, relationships with bus operators, and the fact that congestion remained the biggest challenge to improving bus services.

The Committee raised the following questions and comments:

- How efficiencies and savings could be passed on to bus users, especially focusing on young people and those in rural areas. The Director of Environment and Highways stated that, whilst many services started or ended in Oxford and faced congestion challenges, the Council aimed to strengthen its working relationship with bus companies through EP+. This approach would allow the Council to negotiate for benefits such as improved ticketing arrangements and reinvestment of profits, ensuring that efficiencies could be shared with passengers, including those in rural communities.
- What the impact of devolution would be and how the timing of the Council's proposals related to the creation of mayoral strategic authorities. The Director of Environment and Highways explained that the recommendation to pursue EP+ would have been made regardless of local government reorganisation, as it did not prevent future franchising by a combined authority. It was advised that franchising was a lengthy and costly process, making it unrealistic to begin before the Council's expected reorganisation. It was also noted that the incoming mayor of a strategic authority would need to review bus models across a potentially wider area, which would be a complex task.

On rural services, it was stated that demand-responsive transport had been trialled but had not been successful in Oxfordshire, though it worked in some other areas; the Council continued to subsidise rural services and support community transport.

- About the possibility of multi-service tickets, including cross-modal options for train and bus users, and whether profits from highly profitable routes could be reinvested to better serve local communities. The Director of Environment and Highways confirmed that multi-operator ticketing already existed through the "my bus" ticket, which had been popular but created financial challenges for the Council due to the way subsidies were calculated. It was also explained that the current Enhanced Partnership included a commitment for operators to reinvest savings from public funding back into the network, though the wording was loose; the EP+ would aim to strengthen this commitment and clarify expectations for

reinvestment, including the potential to support routes that better serve local communities.

- Why the report appeared negative towards franchising, when this stance did not reflect the evidence in the supporting documents, and suggested that the recommendation seemed targeted towards the EP+ model. Concerns were raised that the report emphasised the risks of franchising without equally considering potential rewards, and that the Council should use whichever model would deliver the best service for residents. The importance of joint-ticketing, especially to protect vulnerable users, was highlighted.

The Director of Environment and Highways acknowledged that the report's tone and risk assessment might need revisiting to ensure balance, and that the main reason for recommending EP+ was the timing and complexity of franchising, not an inherent opposition to it.

It was clarified that the congestion charge had not been factored into the original report as it was not in place at the time, but the Council's approach aimed to strengthen commitments from operators and improve services through EP+. The need for joint-ticketing and protecting vulnerable users was recognised, and it was stated that future models should be chosen based on their ability to deliver the best outcomes for residents.

- Whether cross-subsidisation of bus routes was possible under current or proposed models, how the Council supported Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP) aims, and whether there was a clear strategy or mapping for bus routes, especially in rural or underserved areas.

It was explained that cross-subsidisation had historically been restricted by national regulation, but the new bus legislation might change this, though details were not fully clear. The Council's strategy for supporting LTCP aims and developing the bus network was said to be guided by the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), which was under review. It was acknowledged that previous subsidy cuts had significantly reduced rural services, and, whilst every community of over 500 people now had some form of bus service, the Council aimed to continue improving coverage.

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

- Update on case studies about franchising
- The Committee agreed that it expected to scrutinise the detailed EP+ proposals if the model was approved by Cabinet.

51/25 CITY CENTRE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC CONTEXT (Agenda No. 11)

Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet member for Finance, Property, and Transformation, and Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Transformation, were invited to present a report on

progress relating to the redevelopment and regeneration of Oxford city centre, arising from the City Centre Accommodation Strategy.

The Cabinet member for Finance, Property, and Transformation and the Director of Property and Transformation introduced the city centre strategic context plan which provided an overview of ongoing work, including engagement with the city centre accommodation strategy and collaboration with Oxford City Council. They clarified that the presentation was not a finalised strategy but rather an update on current activities, the planning context, and the Council's involvement in regeneration and development in the West End, with further details to be provided as the work progressed.

The Committee had the following questions and comments:

- Why Speedwell House was not shown as part of a developing master plan in the city centre strategic plan, noting that it appeared as a missing brown footprint on the relevant map. The Director of Property and Transformation explained that the map in question was produced by Oxford City Council and likely predated the plans to develop Speedwell House, which accounted for its absence from the master plan illustration.
- The County Council's role in city centre plans, specifically what the County Council could control and what input it could have, given that Oxford City Council was the planning authority. The Director of Property and Transformation explained that, whilst the City Council led on planning, the County Council played a significant role as the highways and transport authority and as a property owner. The County Council contributed by engaging closely with the City Council, supporting the planning process, and influencing developments through its responsibilities and assets, ensuring that county interests and local needs were represented in the ongoing regeneration and strategic planning.
- Clarification regarding the plans for Speedwell House and whether County Hall would still be relocating there, given recent developments. The Director of Property and Transformation explained that, due to the discovery of significant archaeological remains under the Speedwell House car park, the original redevelopment plans had been halted. An options appraisal was underway to determine the future use of Speedwell House, which might now become a city hub with flexible uses such as a chamber and coroner's court, rather than the main office for County Hall. It was confirmed that the County Council remained committed to regenerating Speedwell Street, but the move of County Hall to Speedwell House was no longer certain and would depend on the outcome of the options appraisal.
- Whether it had been a mistake to proceed with the sale of County Hall before conducting thorough archaeological checks at Speedwell House, especially given the subsequent discovery of significant mediaeval remains. The Director of Property and Transformation acknowledged that, with hindsight, the situation was regrettable but emphasised that the area had been subject to repeated redevelopment over the past sixty years, and there had been no prior evidence

from historical maps or records to suggest the presence of important archaeological features beneath the car park.

It was explained that the remains were found only eighteen inches below the tarmac and had not been previously recorded. The archaeological survey that revealed these findings was undertaken as part of the pre-application process for planning permission, rather than before the sale. Although considerable work had been done in preparation for the sale and redevelopment, the discovery had not been anticipated, and the checks performed had not indicated any issues until the formal survey was conducted.

- Concern was expressed that the report lacked detail and a clear vision for the wider southern quarter, with no updates on key sites like the Magistrates Court, telephone exchange, or river access improvements. The focus was mainly on Speedwell House, and questions were raised about when a comprehensive strategy would be available and whether a landowners group existed. In response, the Director of Property and Transformation confirmed that a One Public Estate partnership was underway to develop the area, involving public sector partners and aiming to establish a strategy within twelve months. Public sector landowners were being coordinated through a formal board, and private landowners were to be engaged once objectives are clearer.
- About the potential pedestrianisation of Hythe Bridge Street and its impact on access to Worcester Street car park, especially in light of the planned congestion charge. The Director of Property and Transformation clarified that such changes would be considered in the longer term, beyond the current local plan period. It was noted that any decisions affecting the car park would require coordination with the City Council and its owners. The importance of integrated transport planning and ongoing consultation with bus operators was also emphasised.

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

- The Director of Property and Transformation would supply the amount spent on the Speedwell House project so far.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

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