

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET**

**17 March 2026**

## **Repairing of Defects and Superuser Report 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 Repair of Defects and Superusers at its meeting on 04 February 2026. This item had been requested by the Committee within a shorter timeframe than would ordinarily be the case and members were grateful to officers for preparing the report so swiftly. As a result, the report was a high level one, but the Committee was grateful for the opportunity to scrutinise the Council's work in this area.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet Member for Transport Management, Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, Sean Rooney, Head of Service – Highway Maintenance and Road Safety, for attending to present the report. The Committee was pleased to welcome Richard Lovewell, Business Director for MGroup Highways, Andrew Vidovic,

Team Leader – Inspections, Nigel Clark, Team Leader – Volunteer Coordination, Paul Wilson, Operational Manager (Operations), Dale Stevens, Insurance Manager, and Steven Fitzgerald, Operational Manager (Highways Maintenance) to answer the Committee's questions.

## **SUMMARY**

5. The Cabinet Member for Transport Management emphasised that the report was intended to be candid about performance and backlogs and set this in the context of severe seasonal pressures and the ongoing bedding-in of the current maintenance contract. The Committee welcomed the acknowledgement that continuous improvement remains necessary, notwithstanding the scale of the task and the national pressures on labour and materials.
6. Members expressed strong concern on behalf of residents about recurring potholes, perceived inadequacy of some repairs, and a compensation process experienced as complex and slow. Officers acknowledged the level of public frustration and described the shift towards a more asset management-led approach, including larger permanent repairs, increased resurfacing and surface dressing, and a stronger focus on drainage to reduce water-related failures.
7. The Committee welcomed the contribution of Superusers and the service's stated commitment to transparency. It noted the work underway to improve communications, including the development of a public-facing statistics dashboard, and pressed for clearer escalation routes for councillors and more reliable out-of-hours arrangements for urgent safety hazards.
8. Members also raised concerns regarding early failure of temporary repairs, especially on high-stress corridors such as bus routes, and the wider impact of heavy vehicles on the network. Officers described quality assurance arrangements, learning through the joint Project Improvement Team, and the constraints created by funding shortfalls and increasingly extreme weather patterns.
9. The Committee makes 12 recommendations: the first four are around communications, transparency, and public confidence; the next three about member and community intelligence; the last five are about operational quality, resilience, and continuous improvement.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Communications, Transparency, and Public Confidence**

10. Members were clear that residents' confidence is shaped not only by whether defects are repaired but also by whether the Council communicates openly and consistently about what is being done, what challenges are being faced, and what realistic timescales look like. The Committee noted comments that

recent public messaging had not always landed well, particularly where winter pressures were presented as the sole explanation even though residents feel that they experience a similar cycle each year.

11. Officers acknowledged that communications had not been strong enough and described work with the Council's communications team to provide clearer and more regular updates, including plainer explanations of prioritisation, scheduling constraints, and the distinction between temporary safety treatments on the one hand and permanent repairs on the other. The Committee welcomed this and considered it essential to sustain clearer communication beyond periods of acute pressure.
12. The Committee considers that improving communications would benefit the Council by reducing avoidable enquiries, complaints and escalation traffic, and by supporting more accurate public reporting, including encouraging the provision of photographs and precise locations. Clearer communications would also protect the Council's reputation by demonstrating transparency and responsiveness in a high-profile service area.
13. Without the improvement of communications, the Committee considers there is a risk of continuing public dissatisfaction, reduced trust in FixMyStreet and other reporting routes, and growing perceptions that the Council is not in control of the situation. This could, in turn, increase service demand through repeat reporting and complaints and could also potentially intensify financial pressures through claims and dispute resolution.

***Recommendation 1: That the Council should improve communications with residents, including clearer updates on ongoing works and challenges.***

14. The Committee welcomed officers' commitment to transparency, including the development of a public-facing statistics dashboard intended to show defects reported and repaired, workforce deployment, and progress on backlogs. Members considered that, given the public interest in highway conditions, a clear data picture is vital to improving understanding and maintaining confidence.
15. The Committee noted that the service is described as data-rich and intelligence-led, and that internal performance monitoring has been strengthened. The Committee considers that making a proportionate and accessible subset of that information visible to residents and members would help to explain why priorities are set as they are. This would reduce confusion where cases appear to close automatically as part of wider programmes.
16. The Committee is of the view that launching the dashboard would benefit the Council by providing a single authoritative source of information, supporting councillors in responding to queries, and reducing misinformation and repeated reporting. It would also strengthen scrutiny and corporate oversight by making performance trends easier to track.

17. If, though, the dashboard or some very similar alternative is not launched, the Committee considers that residents will continue to rely on anecdote and isolated experiences. That would further undermine confidence and increase service demand. The absence of transparent performance information could also weaken the Council's ability to demonstrate improvement where that applied, particularly in periods of extreme weather when volumes spike.

***Recommendation 2: That the Council should launch the new public-facing statistics dashboard to provide visibility of defect volumes and repair progress.***

18. Members raised concerns that contact routes can be confusing and inconsistent, particularly during periods of high defect volume. The Committee heard that councillors and residents may variously use FixMyStreet, the Member Portal, engagement officers, and out-of-hours lines, but that, in urgent situations, these routes are not always effective or timely.
19. A specific concern related to out-of-hours arrangements, including an instance reported to the Committee where the response to a councillor seeking assistance with an emergency hazard was considered unacceptable. Officers accepted that this needed investigation and stated that the structure, staffing expectations, and escalation routes of the service would be reviewed to improve reliability.
20. The Committee is of the view that strengthening the escalation routes would bring a multiplicity of benefits. It would help the Council's ability to respond quickly to safety-critical hazards, reduce the risk of harm, and provide councillors with confidence that urgent issues can be escalated to a person empowered to act. Clearer escalation routes also support better governance by ensuring that responsibility and accountability are understood.
21. Without improvement, the Committee is concerned that there is a risk that urgent hazards will not be addressed promptly, increasing both safety risk and potential liability. In addition, councillor frustration and reduced confidence in the service may grow, with consequential impacts on public perception and the Council's ability to manage incidents effectively.

***Recommendation 3: That the Council should strengthen communication and escalation routes for elected members, including reviewing the adequacy of the out of hours service.***

22. Members noted that a recurrent source of frustration is the lack of clear public visibility about when programmed works will take place and how they relate to ad-hoc defect repairs. Officers described improved forward planning, including earlier publication of multi-year programmes to enable contractors to secure resources in advance and to reduce the impact of predictable seasonal peaks.
23. The Committee considers that clearer publication of planned programmes, including how sections of carriageway are escalated from reactive defect repair to planned resurfacing or surface treatment, would help residents to

understand why some defects are addressed through wider schemes rather than repeated spot repairs.

24. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by improving expectation management, supporting coordination with parishes, districts and utility works, and reducing abortive visits and duplicated reporting. It would also strengthen the Council's ability to demonstrate that it is taking a commendably asset management-led approach rather than reacting piecemeal to individual defects.
25. If not adopted, the Committee believes that confusion will persist about what is planned and when, increasing pressure on customer services and member enquiries. This can also lead to the perception that repairs are delayed without reason, undermining confidence in the service and its prioritisation methods.

***Recommendation 4: That the Council should increase visibility and clarity of programmed works, supported by earlier publication of multi-year plans.***

## **Member and Community Intelligence**

26. Members emphasised that, whilst data sources such as inspections and FixMyStreet are extremely important, they do not always capture lived realities such as rural pinch points, popular cut-throughs, seasonal hazards, and the particular stresses on bus corridors. The Committee heard that risk-based models can miss nuances that councillors and communities understand well.
27. Officers acknowledged this and committed to clearer escalation routes and improved locality-based engagement, including more consistent member responses via established channels. The Committee welcomes this but, at the same time, considers that integration of local intelligence must be systematic rather than ad hoc and should visibly inform prioritisation decisions.
28. The benefit to the Council of improving the accuracy and legitimacy of prioritisation, enabling earlier identification of high-consequence sites, and reducing the likelihood of repeat failures in places where the local context suggests that more robust interventions are needed should not be underestimated. Without such, the Committee considers there is a risk that decisions will be perceived as overly centralised or opaque, with missed opportunities to prevent emerging risks. This can lead to avoidable dissatisfaction, repeated reporting, and a sense that local democratic knowledge is undervalued.

***Recommendation 5: That the Council should improve integration of local knowledge, especially of elected members, into prioritisation of repairs and programmed works.***

29. In its discussion, the Committee noted the fact that the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee had scrutinised the effectiveness of the FixMyStreet app and that that Committee had made recommendations to Cabinet already<sup>1</sup>. The Committee's focus was, therefore, not on FixMyStreet as such but, given the connection between highways defects and reporting them on FixMyStreet, there was an element of unavoidable overlap.
30. The Committee noted continuing concerns that some FixMyStreet cases appear to be closed before a visible repair has taken place, which damages public confidence. Officers explained that closures can reflect temporary emergency works or automatic updates where a defect is scheduled into a wider programme. Officers nonetheless accepted that the workflow and messaging must be clearer so that residents can understand what has happened and what will happen next.
31. Members also discussed the importance of photographs and clear location information in improving triage, reducing avoidable site visits, and speeding repairs. Officers highlighted ongoing work to improve FixMyStreet reporting functionality, including enabling images to be uploaded earlier in the process and improving geolocation.
32. The Committee is concerned that, without improvement, mistrust in FixMyStreet will deepen, leading to increased escalation through multiple channels and increased administrative burden. The danger is that poor information quality can also generate abortive visits and inefficiency at a time when operational capacity is under pressure.
33. Instead, the Committee believes that a successful review would benefit the Council by reducing duplicate reporting, improving the quality of information received, and strengthening trust in the primary public reporting channel. Clearer status updates will also support councillors and customer services in responding accurately to enquiries.

***Recommendation 6: That the Council should review the FixMyStreet process, ensuring cases are not closed prematurely and status updates are clearer.***

34. The Committee welcomed the contribution of Superusers, volunteers across the county who are trained to inspect potholes, blocked drains, and damaged kerbing, and noted that the scheme is a valued example of community partnership. Officers described a large network of volunteers and the role they play in inspecting, escalating and placing instructions for certain categories of defects, bringing local knowledge to bear.
35. Members also heard that Superusers can experience significant workload pressures during peak periods. Feedback suggested that, whilst officer responses to high-risk escalations are often effective, there is still scope to strengthen communication, to refresh training and support, and to ensure that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s80451/FixMyStreet.pdf>

there are clearer escalation processes. This would ensure volunteers are empowered and protected from burnout.

36. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by sustaining an important capacity multiplier, improving the quality and consistency of volunteer-raised reports, and strengthening community confidence that local issues are being identified early and acted upon. Without this, the Council could lose a valuable source of intelligence which would, in turn, increase pressure on inspection and customer service capacity.

***Recommendation 7: That the Council should enhance training and support in relation to the Superuser scheme.***

## **Operational Quality, Resilience, and Continuous Improvement**

37. Members raised concerns about temporary “sweep and fill” repairs that can fail quickly, sometimes within hours or days, and about the public perception that some defects are repeatedly addressed without lasting improvement. Officers explained that temporary repairs are used only in exceptional circumstances. They are intended to address immediate safety risks where full traffic management or a permanent fix is not feasible at the time with such locations being recorded for follow-up permanent works.
38. The Committee considered the discussion about repeat failures on bus routes particularly important. Officers acknowledged that high-stress corridors, including those carrying heavy or electric buses, can experience rapid deterioration and that temporary treatments are not necessarily durable in these environments. The Committee heard that analysis of repeat failures was underway to assess materials, patch size, and scheduling.
39. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by reducing repeat visits, improving safety outcomes, and lowering whole-life cost by directing the right treatment to the right location first time. It would also support public confidence by demonstrating that the Council is learning from failure patterns and adjusting methods accordingly.
40. Perpetuating a costly cycle of repeated repairs, continued disruption to road users, and increased exposure to claims and complaints would be to no-one’s benefit and the Committee is strongly of the view that this should be avoided.

***Recommendation 8: That the Council should review approaches to temporary repairs, including failure patterns on bus routes.***

41. Members explored whether more could be done to prevent Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs) using unsuitable roads, particularly where C roads and rural routes are vulnerable to heavy loading. Officers acknowledged the significant contribution heavy vehicles make to road deterioration and explained that enforcement of weight restrictions rests primarily with Thames Valley Police,

though the Council continues to work with partners through established road safety and freight arrangements.

42. The Committee recognised that preventative approaches such as drainage improvements, structural patching and prioritised resurfacing on HGV and bus corridors are essential. However, it also considered that the Council should keep under review additional tools and interventions, including routing measures, improved signage, engagement with freight operators, and strengthened use of planning and development levers where relevant.
43. Further measures would aid the Council by protecting the network, reducing the rate of deterioration, and improving value for money by targeting interventions that reduce avoidable damage. It would also support wider objectives in the Freight and Logistics Strategy and improve safety for communities exposed to heavy vehicle traffic.
44. The Committee is concerned that, without such further measures, deterioration pressures on vulnerable roads will continue to rise, increasing both reactive repair volumes and long-term maintenance costs. There is also a risk of continued community concern and dissatisfaction where heavy vehicle impacts are visible and persistent.

***Recommendation 9: That the Council should explore further measures to limit the impact of HGVs on vulnerable roads.***

45. Allied to the discussion about HGVs, members noted that wider changes in vehicle weight, including a trend towards heavier cars and the increasing prevalence of electric vehicles, are likely to be placing additional pressure on road surfaces. One study “by the University of Leeds calculated that the average EV causes 2.24 times more stress on road surfaces than a comparable petrol car”<sup>2</sup> and another has assessed the national fleet impact of electric battery and hydrogen fuel vehicles.<sup>3</sup> The impact of this sits alongside other pressures such as extreme weather and historic under-investment, both of which were acknowledged during the discussion.
46. The Committee considers that understanding the impact of changing vehicle weights is important for both strategic planning and operational practice. It could inform decisions about materials, treatment selection, the prioritisation of routes, and the Council’s engagement with national bodies on funding formulas and design standards.
47. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by strengthening the evidence base for asset management and by enabling the service to anticipate and mitigate future deterioration pressures. A clearer understanding of causation would support better targeting of limited resources and also help to make the case for longer-term sustainable funding. The Committee noted it

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<sup>2</sup> [Can Our Road Infrastructure Handle Heavier Electric Vehicles - Highways Today](#)

<sup>3</sup> Low, J.M., Haszeldine, R.S. & Harrison, G.P. The hidden cost of road maintenance due to the increased weight of battery and hydrogen trucks and buses—a perspective. *Clean Techn Environ Policy* **25**, 757–770 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10098-022-02433-8>

was advised that the Council had not given significant consideration to this and the Committee believes that it should do so.

48. The Council needs such a review because, otherwise, the Committee is nervous that the Council's maintenance approach will be based on assumptions that no longer reflect the reality of network loading. That could lead to less durable interventions, increased defect volumes, and a widening gap between available resources and the level of maintenance required.

***Recommendation 10: That the Council should undertake a review of the impact of cars being significantly heavier on average than previously and the resultant pressure on roads.***

49. The Committee discussed the importance of inspection routines, not only for identifying defects but also for managing liability. Officers described a combination of routine inspections, ad hoc checks prompted by reports, and joint quality assurance with the contractor. The Committee also heard that inspection resources were stretched during the recent surge, as staff were required both for winter service activity and for defect response.
50. Members sought reassurance about the oversight of repair quality and early failures. Officers described supervision arrangements within the contractor's delivery chain and independent Council inspections, together with the principle that early failures remain the contractor's liability. The Committee welcomed the strengthening of quality checks but considered that inspection capacity should be reviewed to ensure it remains adequate as volumes, weather pressures and network deterioration increase.
51. The Council must meet its duty to maintain the highway to a safe standard. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by improving risk management, ensuring defects are identified and categorised consistently, and supporting defensible decision-making where claims arise. Improved inspection intelligence also strengthens programme planning and reduces the likelihood of preventable deterioration becoming acute.

***Recommendation 11: That the Council should consider whether additional inspection capacity is needed and strengthen inspection processes.***

52. The Committee welcomed evidence that continuous improvement is being pursued through joint working with the contractor, including the Project Improvement Team. Officers described a move towards more durable permanent repairs, improved defect coding and completion processes, and the use of learning from trials and past performance to inform practice.
53. Members also noted that residents experience repeat failures and therefore expect the system to learn quickly and visibly from what does not work, especially in winter conditions and on high-stress routes. The Committee was reassured that materials and techniques are selected according to road type,

weather and defect characteristics, but emphasised that learning must be embedded, tracked and communicated so that practice evolves and confidence is maintained.

54. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by improving first-time fix rates, reducing abortive visits, increasing asset life, and supporting value for money. It also strengthens contract management by ensuring that evidence of performance informs specifications, benchmarks and workforce practice.
55. If not accepted, the Committee considers that the same patterns of failure are likely to recur which would drive up costs and further exacerbate public dissatisfaction. Failure to embed learning risks undermining the credibility of both the Council's oversight and the contractor's delivery model.

***Recommendation 12: That the Council should continue to embed learning from repair failures, including materials choices and method improvements.***

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

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

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

57. 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.'
58. 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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