

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 19 June 2026

Bus Services and Rural Transport (including Mobility Hubs) 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 & Scrutiny Committee considered a report on Bus Services and Rural Transport (including Mobility Hubs) at its meeting on 22 April 2026. This item was requested by the Committee to scrutinise the implementation of the Council's transport policies for rural areas and to explore how connectivity for rural communities could be strengthened.
4. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Andrew Gant and Councillor Judy Roberts, the then Cabinet Members for Transport Management and for Place, Environment, and Climate Action respectively, for attending to present the report. The Committee was also grateful for the attendance and input of Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place, and Ben Smith, Strategic Transport Manager, Melissa

Goodacre, Sustainable Transport Manager, Ashley Hayden, Team Leader: Area Travel Plans, Dave Harrison, Team Leader: Public Transport, Eric Manners: Technical Leader: Active Travel.

SUMMARY

5. The Cabinet Members emphasised that improving rural transport is a key element of the Council's Local Transport & Connectivity Plan. The Committee heard that, since severe cuts to bus subsidies in 2016, significant progress has been made in restoring and enhancing services through new funding streams (such as the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan funding and section 106 developer contributions).
6. As a result, the Council now supports a broad network of rural bus routes, and, in some areas, is exceeding service levels before the cuts. Members recognised achievements such as the introduction of the *MyBus* multi-operator ticket, which has increased bus usage across Oxfordshire, and that most larger villages are again served by a scheduled bus route.
7. The Committee welcomed the progress made in restoring bus services but remained concerned about gaps in rural connectivity, particularly for smaller settlements. Members highlighted the need to explore practical feeder or shuttle options that could connect isolated communities to main routes and reduce barriers to work, services and everyday life.
8. Members also focused on how the network is presented, planned and delivered. Key themes were clearer public communication, including more accessible language for mobility hubs, continued attention to accessibility at stops and along routes, better use of local demand data, stronger alignment with Movement and Place Plans (MAPPs) and section 106 (s.106) priorities, and faster progress on major interchange schemes such as Oxford railway station.
9. The Committee makes seven recommendations: the first three relate to improving rural connectivity and public engagement; the next two focus on accessibility and evidence-based service planning; and the final two concern the integration of transport in planning and accelerating key infrastructure schemes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Connectivity and Communication in Rural Transport

10. The Committee recognises that some rural communities remain at risk of isolation due to infrequent or non-existent bus services. Members discussed examples of small villages or hamlets that lie just beyond the reach of main bus routes, where residents without cars can struggle to access essential

services or larger towns.

11. The Committee explored whether pilot shuttle or feeder bus services could be trialled in such contexts. A shuttle service, using smaller vehicles or flexible timetables, might link a cluster of villages to a main transport corridor or nearby market town, allowing residents to connect with existing bus or train services. Members noted that this approach could complement the fixed-route network by covering the “last mile” gaps, without requiring a full-sized bus on a low-demand route.
12. In considering this idea, the Committee acknowledged that more tailored rural transport schemes have been attempted elsewhere, sometimes with mixed results. Demand-responsive minibus services, for instance, often face high costs and low uptake. However, members felt that focused shuttle or feeder pilots in areas of clear local demand could yield valuable insights at relatively modest cost.
13. By targeting an area where there is community interest – perhaps working with parish councils or volunteer drivers – a pilot could test whether better connectivity leads to increased bus use and improved well-being for residents who currently have few options.
14. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by helping to reduce rural isolation and social inequality. Offering even a limited feeder service could dramatically improve quality of life for those in remote communities, including by providing access to education, employment opportunities, health care and shopping that might otherwise be out of reach.
15. A successful pilot could demonstrate an innovative model of rural connectivity that, if cost-effective, might be scaled up or replicated elsewhere but failing to explore such a possibility might also attract criticism that the Council is too narrowly focused on conventional routes and is not doing enough to support the “hardest to reach” communities in Oxfordshire.
16. The Committee, therefore, recommends that serious attention should be paid to the possibility.

Recommendation 1: That the Council should explore pilot shuttle or feeder bus services in rural areas to improve connectivity between smaller settlements and main bus corridors, where this would reduce isolation and improve access to services.

17. The Committee discussed the ongoing programme of Mobility Hubs and noted that, whilst the concept is strategically important, the terminology itself may be a barrier to public engagement. Members found that the term ‘mobility hub’ itself is not widely understood by residents. There was a concern that it sounds technical or abstract.

18. The Committee heard that mobility hubs are meant to be enhanced transport interchanges offering facilities for buses, bicycles, and other shared mobility options – essentially modern transport hubs – yet this message can easily be lost if the language fails to reflect that. Members therefore considered how communications about such projects could be made clearer and more accessible, most easily by adopting simpler terminology.
19. Officers had outlined that mobility hub plans are integrated across various initiatives (railway stations, Park & Ride improvements, etc.) and two small demonstrator projects had been consulted upon (at Benson and Carterton). The Committee's concern was that these efforts need public buy-in, and that unduly technical language could undermine that. By referring to them in more familiar terms like "transport hubs" as well as by describing the tangible benefits (safe waiting areas, better connections, cycle parking, etc.), the Council may more effectively convey what is being proposed. In addition, members felt that reviewing communications materials to ensure plain language and local framing would encourage broader participation in consultations and community support for hub projects as they roll out.
20. A straightforward and common-sense term like "transport hub" could reduce confusion and help to integrate these schemes with the public's existing mental map of bus stops, stations and interchanges. Alienating or perplexing the public by using unfamiliar jargon might attract indifferent or negative responses simply because stakeholders do not grasp the vision or confuse "mobility hubs" with something irrelevant to their needs. In the worst case, this could result in missed opportunities for community input, lower usage of the facilities once in place, or even vocal opposition in some areas – all of which would hinder the Council's aims to broaden sustainable transport uptake.
21. The Committee does not consider this a controversial recommendation but one simply intended to make things simpler and more straightforward. It hopes that Cabinet agrees.

Recommendation 2: *That the Council should review the terminology and communications used for "mobility hubs", including consideration of adopting clearer, more accessible language such as "transport hubs".*

22. During its discussion, the Committee was particularly concerned by public awareness of bus services. Members shared examples from their divisions of residents being uncertain about what transport options are available, especially following the many changes in bus provision over recent years. This issue was seen as particularly acute in rural areas and amongst older residents or those who may not use digital tools to find travel information. The Committee emphasised that even the best bus service cannot achieve its purpose if people are not aware of it or do not know how to use it.
23. The Committee was pleased to learn of steps being taken by the Council and bus operators to publicise new services – for instance, through community newsletters, parish networks, and the Council's Oxfordshire Public Transport web pages – but noted that more could be done. Members suggested a

proactive communication and engagement campaign tailored to rural and vulnerable audiences. Examples might include easy-to-read printed timetables or guides distributed through local community venues, targeted social media for villages, or working with libraries, GP surgeries and voluntary groups to spread the word. Clearer, more accessible information on how to use buses (from planning a journey to using the *MyBus* ticket) would help build confidence for less frequent travellers or those who have lost habitual use of buses.

24. By ensuring that all residents know what services exist and how to access them, bus patronage is likely to increase, supporting both the financial viability of routes and the Council's targets for reducing car usage.
25. Without such outreach, the risk is that certain groups (like elderly or isolated residents) remain unaware of options and continue to feel disconnected or rely on less sustainable modes. Underused services could struggle to justify ongoing funding, potentially leading to a cycle of declining routes and lost confidence.
26. The Committee would, therefore, welcome increased public engagement regarding bus services, particularly in rural areas and with vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 3: That the Council improves communication and engagement to ensure residents, particularly in rural areas and vulnerable groups, are aware of available bus services and how to access them.

Accessibility and Evidence-based Planning

27. The Committee's attention was drawn to the physical accessibility of bus services, especially in rural and semi-rural areas. Members noted that obstacles on the journey to and from a bus stop can be a significant deterrent, even if a bus route itself is available. Narrow or absent footways, unsafe road crossings, steep kerbs, and poorly maintained paths were all cited as factors that can discourage people – particularly those with disabilities, older residents or parents with prams – from using buses.
28. The Committee discussed how investment in accessible infrastructure should keep pace with improvements in bus frequency or coverage. The Committee acknowledged that the Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan and capital programmes already include elements for upgrading bus stops, installing shelters, and improving nearby pavements or crossings.
29. However, members stressed that this needs to remain a priority and to be approached in a comprehensive way. Each new or existing bus route should be assessed for any environmental barriers that prevent easy access, and these should be addressed as part of service enhancement. The Committee was keen to ensure that improvements such as dropped kerbs, safe

pedestrian crossings to bus stops, good lighting, and step-free access are systematically delivered, so that all residents are able to access the bus network easily.

30. By prioritising accessibility improvements, the Council will enable more people to confidently choose the bus, supporting higher patronage and social equity. It is also the case that better footways and crossings help all pedestrians, not just bus users. Demonstrating visible improvements at street level, whether that be a new crossing or an accessible footpath, would reinforce the Council's commitment to its transport vision but, perhaps more importantly, would make a tangible and positive difference to residents' daily lives.
31. Without such improvement, buses or routes might see limited use if potential passengers physically cannot reach them comfortably or safely. This would not only weaken the return on investment in services but would also fail those who rely on accessible design (for example, wheelchair users or those with mobility difficulties).
32. Progress on these small but significant improvements strikes the Committee as both valuable and achievable. It, therefore, recommends that the Council should continue to prioritise such improvements.

Recommendation 4: That the Council continues to prioritise improvements to accessibility of bus stops and routes, including footways, crossings and dropped kerbs, as part of the Bus Service Improvement Plan and capital programmes.

33. The Committee reflected on the data and analysis used to inform bus service planning, particularly for rural areas. Officers explained that the current network ensures coverage to a large majority of communities above certain population thresholds, with every parish in Oxfordshire with a population of 500 or more having a scheduled bus service and 81% of those with a population between 100 and 500 having one. However, members questioned whether a purely population-based approach fully captures nuanced patterns of need or potential demand. For example, a village of modest size might actually generate high ridership if it has an older demographic or lacks alternative transport, whereas another larger community might see lower demand for reasons such as proximity to a railway station or car ownership levels.
34. The Committee considered that supplementing broad population statistics with more granular data could lead to better-informed decisions about where to maintain, enhance or introduce services.
35. Members suggested that the Council should explore options for gathering and analysing data at a finer scale. This could include usage data from existing services, targeted surveys of residents in specific areas, or liaison with parish councils to gauge unmet needs. By comparing factors like demographics, journey purposes, and current travel behaviours, the planning of bus services could become more responsive.

36. The Committee felt that such evidence – perhaps combined with innovative tools like predictive modelling or pilot projects – would complement the strategic view provided by the Bus Service Improvement Plan and ensure resources are deployed where they can make the biggest difference.
37. A richer evidence base would support more effective and efficient service provision. With deeper insight into localised demand, the Council can work to tailor bus services to actual needs – potentially increasing bus patronage and fare income where demand is higher than raw population might suggest. It also helps to future-proof planning by highlighting emerging trends (such as shifting work patterns or new development-driven demand) early on. In sum, better data and analysis improve decision-making, value for money, and the credibility of the Council's public transport strategy.
38. If the Council relies solely on broad, population-level analysis, important opportunities and issues may be missed. Neglecting under-served areas could lead to community frustration and lost growth, whilst overestimating demand elsewhere would waste resources and undermine confidence. Adopting a more detailed approach would help address these risks and improve the county's bus network.

Recommendation 5: That the Council should consider options for more granular assessment of demand for bus services, to complement population-based analysis and inform future service planning.

Integrated Planning and Delivery of Transport Infrastructure

39. The Committee noted the intersection between transport planning and development planning, particularly through tools like Movement and Place Plans (MAPPs) and s.106 agreements. Members were clear that sustainable transport – including local bus services and active travel infrastructure – must be embedded in these processes and not overshadowed by a focus on major road schemes alone. When any large new housing developments are proposed, the planning stage is an opportunity to secure and design in bus routes, safe walking/cycling paths, and even space for future mobility hubs or interchanges (or, given the recommendation above, transport hubs).
40. The Committee sought assurances that the Council uses its planning policies and negotiation of developer contributions to champion such measures, ensuring new growth delivers for local transport needs as well as for strategic infrastructure.
41. Officers outlined that MAPPs are being developed to articulate tailored transport priorities for specific areas, with input from local members and stakeholders. The Committee welcomed this approach and emphasised that the final plans – along with the Council's stance on s.106 priorities – should explicitly reflect bus connectivity and active travel requirements.

42. Members gave examples of previous developments where bus provision or pedestrian access had appeared to be an afterthought, leading to car-dependent communities. By contrast, good practice would involve, for example, requiring developers to fund early bus services or cycle links to town centres as part of their obligations.
43. The Committee believes that firmly integrating these priorities into planning frameworks will help to turn the Council's sustainable transport policies into on-the-ground reality over the long term. By clearly embedding local transport needs into planning and developer-funding decisions, the Council can shape new developments that are less car-reliant and better connected to public and active travel networks from the very beginning.
44. This proactive stance would help to avoid expensive retrofitting of infrastructure later and foster healthier, more sustainable travel habits among residents of new housing areas. It also reinforces the Council's leadership role in advocating for balanced growth – demonstrating both to the public and to partners that bus services, cycling, and walking are being treated with equal importance as roads in Oxfordshire's future plans.
45. If it does not integrate these priorities into its MAPPs as well as s.106 priorities, the Committee is concerned that the Council may miss opportunities to expand its transport network. Developments lacking provision for buses or active travel can result in prolonged high car usage where it is not necessary. This would undermine both climate and congestion goals. Not securing contributions for local transport improvements could also strain Council budgets later.
46. The Committee warns that focusing only on major infrastructure would be counterproductive and therefore calls for MAPPs and s.106 to clearly reflect local transport needs.

Recommendation 6: That the Council should ensure that Movement and Place Plans and section 106 priorities clearly reflect local transport needs, including bus services and active travel, alongside strategic infrastructure.

47. The Committee discussed key infrastructure and interchange projects that impact local bus connectivity and the transport network's success. The Committee considers that timely project delivery is crucial. Oxford railway station redevelopment was highlighted as an example, with requests for interim improvements like better signage and facilities to provide short-term benefits.
48. The Committee believes that integration of local plans with broader corridor and rail strategies, including East-West Rail and regional transit, is necessary. The Council should accelerate parallel planning for feeder links and access, ensuring new infrastructure complements existing services and improves connectivity.

49. Acting quickly would benefit both the Council and residents by speeding up improvements, easing congestion, improving transfers, and building public confidence. Aligning projects would maximise the impact of investment as well as promoting a coherent transport network. Contrariwise, delays or poor integration risk ongoing congestion, missed funding, and reduced public transport appeal. Failure to enhance interchanges or coordinate strategies can leave gaps in connectivity, so timely action is needed to deliver effective transport solutions.
50. Whilst recognising that certain elements are outside the control of the Council, the Committee nonetheless calls for greater progress on key schemes.

Recommendation 7: *That the Council should accelerate progress on key transport and interchange schemes, including interim improvements at Oxford railway station and integration with wider corridor and rail strategies.*

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

51. The Committee anticipates considering bus services again during the municipal year, particularly the Bus Plan.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

52. 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.
53. 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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