

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 19 June 2026

Unauthorised Waste Disposal Site near Kidlington: Interim 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

1. The Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered a report on an unauthorised waste disposal site near Kidlington at its meeting on 22 April 2026. This matter had attracted significant public interest as a result of the scale of the illegal activity and its potential impacts. Although the situation remains under a live criminal investigation led by the Environment Agency, the Committee felt it important to scrutinise the Council's role and response at this stage whilst being careful not to prejudice ongoing legal proceedings.
2. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Liz Leffman and Cllr Judy Roberts, then the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Place, Environment, and Climate Action respectively, and Robin Rogers, Director of

Economy & Place, for presenting the interim report and answering the Committee's questions. The Committee was also grateful for the attendance of Nicola Riley, Cherwell District Council's Assistant Director: Wellbeing and Housing Services, Michael Adcock, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Jason Sherwood, Head of Regulatory Planning Enforcement, David Periam, Planning Development Manager, Neal Richmond, Team Leader: Enforcement, and Matthew Case, Team Leader: Applications, who provided insights into how the Council and partner agencies have managed this incident so far.

SUMMARY

3. The then Leader introduced the report and thanked residents, local members, officers, and partner agencies for their work in responding to the large-scale illegal waste site near Kidlington. She emphasised the seriousness and complexity of the illegal waste activity, its links to organised criminal behaviour, and the impact on the local community. Councillor Leffman highlighted the importance of partnership working, particularly with the Environment Agency and district councils, and advised that progress had been made in securing the site and commencing clearance, noting the national relevance of the lessons emerging from the incident.
4. Councillor Roberts supported those remarks and reflected on the technical sophistication and speed of the illegal operation. The Cabinet Member acknowledged that, whilst the response once the scale of the issue was understood had been strong, there were lessons to be learned about internal escalation and member communication. Councillor Roberts stressed the importance of improving early intelligence and governance arrangements.
5. The Director of Economy and Place shared photographs to provide visual context, explaining the site's scale, proximity to the River Cherwell and drainage features, and the vegetation that initially concealed the activity. He described how flooding exposed the waste and increased risk, the protective measures installed to prevent pollution, the creation of a raised working compound to mitigate flooding, and the logistical challenges of removal, including overhead power cables that added to the site's risk profile.
6. The Committee had a wide-ranging discussion and paid particular attention to timelines – including when and how the activity happened and was discovered and when it was reported and to whom. It also explored what powers the Council and other partners had and the effectiveness of their partnership working.
7. In discussing this issue, the Committee recognised the national dimension of waste crime: this is not an isolated case, but part of a wider surge in organised illegal dumping that demands stronger preventative and enforcement measures. The Committee's discussion focused in particular on what the Council can learn from this experience and how it can play its part in preventing and responding to similar incidents in future.

8. The Committee makes two recommendations, one to ensure that lessons are captured and learned and the other to call for elected members to be engaged when crises happen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

9. The Committee considered the timeline and response to the illegal site near Kidlington to be something of a 'wake-up call.' The case illustrates how quickly a situation can escalate: within weeks, a seemingly minor activity on a rural plot evolved into a major risk, with material piled dangerously near a major road and a river.
10. The Committee heard that initial warning signs were raised by local authorities and the public in June 2025 which led to early engagement by Cherwell District Council and the County Council. A joint site visit with the Environment Agency swiftly confirmed the scale of the wrongdoing.
11. The Committee commends the inter-agency action but believes that more systematic early detection and rapid escalation processes are needed, given the increasingly sophisticated tactics used by waste criminals (such as rapid site changes and opaque land transactions). The Committee was keen to ensure that, in any future incident, Thames Valley Police is involved at the earliest opportunity.
12. The Committee was keen to ensure that all lessons from this incident are identified and learned, not only by the Council but across partner agencies. This means reviewing the detection and response steps taken and identifying what could be done differently to spot and stop illegal waste operations sooner. For example, the Committee noted that better use of intelligence sharing, data analysis and new technologies (such as drone surveillance and waste tracking systems) could provide earlier warnings of unusual activity.
13. The Committee also underlined the need for even closer coordination with the Environment Agency, district councils and others, to guarantee that when one agency receives a report of potential illegal waste, all relevant bodies are alerted at once and can act together. Whilst Local Government Reorganisation will mean that there are fewer councils involved, partnership working will nonetheless remain key.
14. Within the Council, the Committee suggested that internal communication channels should be reviewed to ensure that different services – such as planning enforcement, highways, fire and rescue, and legal – are quickly mobilised and kept aligned when a major environmental incident first comes to light.
15. The Committee considers that adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by strengthening its ability to prevent and tackle illegal waste activity, both within its own powers and also in partnership with

others. It would help the Council identify future problems at an earlier stage, enable faster intervention, and improve joint working with partners. By capturing the lessons of this case and making practical changes, whether in monitoring, staffing, or inter-agency protocols, the Council can reduce the risk of similar incidents causing harm to communities and the environment. Strengthened early detection and coordination will also support the Council's reputation as a vigilant and proactive authority in addressing criminal waste activities.

16. Without these improvements, the Committee believes there is a risk that a similar incident could go undetected longer than necessary or that the response could be less efficient. The absence of structured learning from this case might lead to repeated mistakes or delays in future, which could expose the Council and the public to avoidable dangers and costs. Failure to build stronger early-warning systems and communication channels might result in continued vulnerability to complex waste crimes which, as seen in this case, can rapidly become major threats to public safety and environmental quality.

Recommendation 1: *That the Council should ensure that lessons learned from this incident be captured and used to strengthen early detection, escalation, inter-agency coordination, and internal communication in future cases of illegal waste activity.*

17. The Committee emphasised that local councillors must be kept in the loop when a serious incident such as this is unfolding and being addressed. Members noted that their communities look to them for information and reassurance. In this instance, the Committee heard that much of the detail had to remain confidential owing to legal sensitivities and the Committee recognises that was clearly essential to avoid undermining enforcement action.
18. Nonetheless, members felt that there is a need for timely, appropriate briefings so that councillors can fulfil their roles in supporting communities and ensuring accountability. Without breaching necessary confidences, the Council should have protocols for updating relevant members (for example, the local Divisional Members and, if appropriate, the relevant Cabinet Member and Scrutiny Chair) at key milestones such as when significant enforcement actions are taken, when major risks emerge, or when the situation materially changes.
19. The Committee heard that, initially, officers had underestimated the scale of the site and that it had not, therefore, been escalated to the extent that it might have been. The Committee understood that but considered it extremely regrettable that the relevant Cabinet Member had not been informed until September, over two months after concerns were first raised and two months after the joint site visit by the Council, Cherwell District Council, and the Environment Agency in July. Whilst it is not the role of members to interfere in operational matters, the Committee is of the view that such an incident is so significant as to mean it becomes strategic and is, therefore, something that

must mean that the Cabinet Member is at least formally aware at an early point.

20. Adopting this recommendation would benefit the Council by maintaining trust and transparency between the authority and elected members. If councillors are appropriately informed, they can assist in public communication (within the constraints of legal confidentiality), address residents' concerns effectively, and provide informed democratic oversight. This helps to uphold public confidence in the Council's management of serious incidents and ensures that members are not caught by surprise by developments that affect their communities.
21. If members are not kept informed, there is a risk that misinformation or rumour will fill the void. In the absence of clear updates, councillors may be left unable to answer legitimate questions from residents, leading to frustration and undermining confidence in the Council's response. A lack of member awareness could also hamper the Council's own oversight and decision-making, particularly when issues escalate unexpectedly. The Committee therefore urges the Council to strike the right balance between necessary confidentiality and proactive communication with members as complex incidents play out.

Recommendation 2: *That the Council should ensure that elected members are kept appropriately informed of progress and key milestones, subject to legal and investigation-related constraints.*

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

22. The Committee anticipates receiving another update during the 2026/2027 municipal year.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

23. 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.'
24. 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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