

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 5 August 2025

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Committee members present:

Councillor Powell (Chair)

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Mundy

Councillor Qayyum

Councillor Rowley (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Jarvis

Councillor Ottino

Councillor Stares

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor

Hannah Carmody-Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer

Jenny Barker, Regeneration and Development Lead

Also present:

Councillor Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Culture

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Azad and Miles sent apologies.

22. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

23. Chair's Announcements

The Chair reminded the Committee that item 7 contained an exempt appendix and requested that if any member wished to discuss this, they indicate this to allow the Committee to enter private session.

24. Minutes of the previous meeting

The Committee resolved to **approve** the minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2025 as a true and accurate record.

25. Addresses by members of the public

The Committee heard one public address from Mr. Glazebrook from Friends of Grandpont Nature Park.

The Chair invited Mr. Glazebrook to address the Committee as follows:

Almost 2000 people, the vast majority of them local residents, have now signed the petition against the Oxpens River Bridge and its connecting paths. There are many reasons people are up in arms - the ecological destruction involved, the lack of democratic consultation, the fact that there are already two excellent pedestrian and cycle bridges within quarter of a mile of the site, the misuse of £10million of public money intended to facilitate affordable housing - but what I want to focus on today is how the bridge singularly fails to meet its own intended purpose - to provide a floodproof connection from Osney Mead to Oxpens.

The local plan 2036, at pages 134-135, specifies the need for a new pedestrian and cycle bridge to link Osney Mead with the other side of the river. The local plan also makes clear that a flood evacuation path out of Osney Mead is required for planning permission to be granted for the site. The notes on Policy SP2, covering Osney Mead, state that "The site specific flood risk assessment must demonstrate how the development will be safe otherwise planning permission will not be granted. It is recognised that the FRA may not be able to demonstrate a dry risk/ low hazard rating route to dry land." (134, 9.23)

So the local plan specifies the need for both a new bridge linking Osney Mead to the other side of the river, and a floodproof route out of Osney Mead. These two things have subsequently been combined into plans for a single floodproof connection reaching all the way from Osney Mead across the river, as is made clear in several official documents, including for example, the pathworks optioneering report commissioned by the City Council and produced by Stantec in 2022.

But there is a problem. The Council decided not to build this bridge directly from Osney Mead to Oxpens, as envisaged by the local plan, but instead to build it on adjacent community-owned green space, from Grandpont Nature Park to Oxpens Meadow. What this meant was that, to reach this new bridge from Osney Mead, users would now have to go across a stream and under a railway bridge along a section of the towpath that frequently floods.

To solve this problem, the City Council commissioned Stantec to develop a project called the Osney Pathworks, to create a new floodproof path linking Osney Mead to the planned new bridge. The preferred plan was to erect floodwalls under the railway bridge. But the Environment Agency vetoed this proposal in 2022, as it would cause further flooding elsewhere. None of the other solutions suggested by Stantec meet current standards, and their report admitted there is no solution available which

adequately addresses the flooding issue whilst also meeting current safety standards for cycling and walking.

This remains the case today. There is still no solution to the issue of flooding on the path between Osney Mead and the proposed new bridge.

This makes the bridge completely redundant. It does not serve the basic purpose for which it is required in the local plan - to provide a new floodproof connection from Osney Mead across the river.

This is very serious, because, as I said, without such a connection, the 600 new graduate rooms planned for Osney Mead cannot be granted planning permission. This raises the possibility of a fourth bridge within a quarter of a mile having to be built, directly connecting Osney Mead and Oxpens, as originally envisaged by the local plan.

The City Council is now right on the verge of committing up to £14million of public money and causing irrevocable damage to a cherished piece of countryside on our doorstep, for a bridge that singularly fails to meet its basic purpose. We urge you - please do not be a party to this shocking waste of money and biodiversity. The 2000 mostly local residents who have signed up to our campaign of course believe that the bridge in its current location should be scrapped altogether. However, at a bare minimum, it is abundantly clear that no further funds should be committed so long as there remains no viable plan to floodproof the connection between Osney Mead and the new bridge. Without this in place, the bridge serves no purpose that is not already met by the two existing bridges in the area.

If you would like to be in touch about this, or to see any of the documentation I have referred to today, please do not hesitate to be in touch with Friends of Grandpont Nature Park.

The Chair thanked Mr. Glazebrook and invited questions from the Committee.

Councillor Ottino sought to clarify the role of the Scrutiny Committee when discussing item 7, noting limitations to its powers and the need to ensure it does not encroach on the role of other committees. The Chair confirmed that the Scrutiny Committee is not a decision-making body but can deliberate and comment on reports before them. The Chair reminded members of their responsibility to constrain their questions to those relevant only to the report provided and to declare any relevant interests.

Councillor Altaf-Khan noted his understanding that the report in item 7 related to the capital programme and a request for more money to pursue the project. As such he expressed his belief that the Scrutiny Committee is entitled to question the Cabinet Member on this and discuss the report. The Committee also heard that Councillor Altaf-

Khan did not see the value in repeating any historic discussions relating to planning and design of the project.

The Chair reminded members that questions at this stage of the meeting should relate only to Mr. Glazebrook's address.

The Committee asked no further questions.

The Chair thanked Mr. Glazebrook.

Councillor Mundy joined the meeting.

26. Councillor addresses on any item for discussion on the Scrutiny agenda

The Committee heard one address from Councillor Muddiman.

The Chair invited Councillor Muddiman to address the Committee as follows:

Dear Scrutiny Committee.

The controversial Oxpens Bridge, which would be in my ward, is on your agenda today. I urge you to use all your powers of scrutiny on this item, when considering the upcoming Cabinet decision to allocate further funds to this project.

Because:

- 1. It is not a sensible use of millions of pounds of public funds to build a new river bridge for the small number of affordable homes that might be built on the Oxpens/Osney Mead developments.*
- 2. Cyclists and pedestrians travelling between the train station and these 2 developments are unlikely to use this route.*
- 3. There already are 3 routes over the River Thames on this section of the river, all within 2 minutes cycle ride of the proposed new bridge. 2 of them are car free.*
- 4. If these funds are to provide infrastructure for affordable homes, they could be much better spent elsewhere, e.g. A bridge over the ring road at Barton to provide a safe route for school children.*
- 5. If these funds are to enable the future development of Osney Mead, by providing safe egress in times of flood, then this bridge does not provide that.*

6. *Any pedestrians or cyclists leaving Osney Mead to escape a flood, would still need to pass under the railway bridge to reach the bridge and higher ground. This area regularly floods, and this project does not provide a flood free route.*
7. *Any future plan to link the existing cycle path from Osney Mead to the proposed Oxpens Bridge would need to lower the footpath under the railway bridge, beside the river, in an area that already floods regularly. There are no current funds for this and no solution that does not impact flooding, on the flood plain.*
8. *If Oxford University would like a new bridge at this location they should fund it. Not the public purse.*

It would be unwise to delegate authority to officers to allocate additional funding to this highly controversial project when:

1. *The outcome of legal proceedings is still unknown.*
2. *From a cost-benefit analysis, the multi-million-pound bridge would provide infrastructure to a relatively small number of new homes and the funds could provide far greater benefit elsewhere.*
3. *Existing bridges close to the proposed site already provide a car free link over the River Thames.*
4. *The proposed bridge does not provide a flood free exit from Osney Mead, which may be needed to gain planning permission for future development on Osney Mead.*

For full transparency on this controversial project, I urge you to recommend that Cabinet must authorise any further spending, rather than a delegated officer.

The Chair thanked Councillor Muddiman and invited questions from the Committee; there were none.

The Chair thanked Councillor Muddiman.

27. Oxpens River Bridge Update

Cabinet, at its meeting on 13 August 2025, will consider a report to agree to the virement of underspend in the current capital programme to increase the project budget in the capital programme for the Oxpens bridge; to accept additional funding for the construction of the bridge from external bodies, and to agree to amending and entering legal agreements as necessary for the funding, construction and transfer of the bridge.

The report was before the Scrutiny Committee to consider and make any recommendations to Cabinet.

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Culture, and Jenny Barker, Regeneration and Development Lead, were present to respond to questions.

The Chair invited Councillor Hollingsworth and the Regeneration and Development Lead to present the report.

Councillor Hollingsworth introduced the report and explained that the principle and original plans for the Oxpens River Bridge project are evidenced in documentation dated back to at least 2008, including policies which were approved by the Council. Several examples were provided including a 2013 SPD. The Committee heard therefore, that the project has been in the pipeline for a long time and did not suddenly appear in 2021.

The Regeneration and Development Lead introduced the Cabinet report, explaining that it seeks to update members on the considerable amount of work that has been undertaken in preparation for delivery of the project in 2026. The Committee heard that the opportunity to deliver the Oxpens Bridge in 2026 had been identified based on the ability to shut the river to move the sections of the bridge into place, and the fact that the area floods in winter months. Furthermore, the Regeneration and Development Lead also explained that the report seeks delegation to enable the Council to enter into necessary agreements, including funding, to enable the delivery of the project.

In relation to the bridge itself, the Regeneration and Development Lead also highlighted the benefits the project would bring to walking and cycling residents of Oxford, and the opportunities it will bring for growth in the West End of the city. An overview of the funding complexities of the project was also provided.

The Chair thanked Councillor Hollingsworth and the Regeneration and Development Lead for their presentation.

The Chair asked that members firstly focus on questions suitable for public discussion, and reserve questions requiring confidential session discussion for later.

Councillor Ottino queried why funds need to be transferred to cover deficits, and whether if further funding from external sources is not obtained, the project could go ahead.

Councillor Altaf-Khan recognised that the delays experience in the project to date caused the requirement for additional money. The Cabinet Member was therefore asked whether it is expected that other considerable projects in the future would also require additional funding.

Councillor Rowley sought clarification on where the powers for delegating extra funding lie, and secondly, whether there is confidence that as much as possible has been done to mitigate further cost increases.

Councillor Hollingsworth, in response to Councillor Altaf-Khan's question, explained that it is not unusual in the current context that capital programmes require further funding given the global price rises caused by events in Ukraine and the pandemic which have generated an unpredictable landscape for construction costs worldwide. In regards costs linked to legal challenges, Councillor Hollingsworth noted his general support of judicial reviews but explained that these costs in relation to planning applications are part of a wider debate which impacts most councils and not something with Oxford City Council can control. In response to Councillor Rowley, it was emphasised that extensive reviews have considered the detail of the project's requirements in efforts to minimise costs as far as possible and necessary work has been undertaken with the Environment Agency.

In response to Councillor Ottino, the Regeneration and Development Lead explained that the report sets out the intention to extend the budget in order to spend more, and the virement of funds within the capital programme is necessary to do this. Funding is being sought externally to replace the funds vired. In response to Councillor Altaf-Khan's concern about repeated overspend on projects, it was explained that the Council works hard to avoid overspend, however the influence of increased construction costs and those required for sustaining internal staff and design teams through delays has culminated in unavoidable additional costs. The Committee heard of the measures being taken to try and reduce these costs, as summarised in the report.

The Chair invited further questions.

Councillor Stares asked where the budget is coming from; specifically, whether money is being transferred from the housing budget. If this were the case, Councillor Stares queried whether this would be a good use of public funds.

Councillor Jarvis firstly asked, in relation to the expansion of the budget envelope and how this sits within the capital programme, whether the slippages for this project sit in addition to the optimism bias built into capital projects, and what the implications of this could be to the Council budget as a whole. Secondly, it was asked what would happen if external funding were not secured, and finally, whether there is a risk of cost fallacy in how confident the Council is that the project will go ahead.

The Chair asked firstly whether the costings within the report account for the possibility of any further delays, and whether, if necessary, further money would be requested again in the future for any subsequent delays. Secondly, the Chair requested confirmation that there would not be impacts on other aspects of the capital programme in light of additional spend on this project if no other bodies come forward to provide funding.

In response to Councillor Stares, Councillor Hollingsworth confirmed that none of the funding for the Oxpens project is from the housing budget and explained that the money was received from Oxfordshire County Council who were recipients of government funding for the Oxfordshire Growth Deal. It was also explained that in the instance that the project did not go ahead, then the funds to cover the costs incurred by Oxford City Council would be kept, and the remainder of the money would be returned to Oxfordshire County Council. In regards the budget envelope, Councillor Hollingsworth explained that there is an optimism bias built into the capital programme and based on previous evidence of spend. Finally, in responses to concerns about cost fallacy, Councillor Hollingsworth referred to paragraph 27 of the report and explained the use of three pots of money.

The Regeneration and Development Lead further summarised the use of the capital salary budget, the energy works budget, and the maintenance budget. It was clarified that these are direct pots from which money can be vired within the financial year, if necessary, without wider impact on the capital programme. In response to budget allowance in the instance of further delays due to judicial appeal, the Regeneration and Development Lead advised the Committee that this had not been factored into budget considerations. It was however noted that if the appeal were to go ahead, the project would be unlikely to meet the 2026 timeline, and the budget would need to be reviewed.

The Chair invited further questions.

Based on the discussion, Councillor Ottino sought to clarify the intention of the report's recommendations with the Cabinet Member and the Regeneration and Development Lead. It was understood that the report seeks to ask Cabinet to extend the budget though the virements listed above in order to allow the opportunity to secure other funding to enable the project to proceed.

The Chair asked in the event that money is not forthcoming, would there be another paper before Cabinet and the Scrutiny Committee to consider any additional spend required. Councillor Hollingsworth confirmed that this would occur but also expressed a hope that it would not be required.

Councillor Mundy asked what lessons have been learned from this project and whether, in retrospect, there has been a failure to consider less attractive projects which could have involved fewer resources and less spend.

The Chair, in relation to the judicial review, asked whether in putting forward this paper to Cabinet on the assumption that there will be no further delays, the Council may be endangering itself by making budgetary assumptions.

Councillor Hollingsworth, in response to Councillor Mundy's question, noted that the principle of the Oxpens Bridge has been in place for a long time without significant

strategic opposition within the Council. As such, the Committee heard that in principle, this was the right project and approach to have taken as it aims to connect different parts of the city. In response to the Chair, Councillor Hollingsworth explained that it has been deemed better to progress as planned with the project and update the Cabinet now, with the understanding that if the appeal against the judicial review does cause further delays, another update will be provided and plans would be reassessed.

At this time the Committee considered Appendix 2 of the report in confidential session.

The Committee resolved that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of Appendix 2 to the Oxpens River Bridge Update Report on the grounds that their presence would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of the Schedule 12A of the Act.

The Committee returned to public session.

The Chair invited any final questions; there were none.

The Chair thanked Councillor Hollingsworth and the Regeneration and Development Lead for their contributions.

The Chair invited the discussion of recommendations.

Councillor Altaf-Khan expressed the view that the report was for Cabinet to consider carefully.

The Chair informed the Committee that he would attend the next Cabinet meeting to represent the views discussed by the Scrutiny Committee within this meeting.

The Chair suggested a recommendation relating to the potential for modelling the possible implications on costing of further delays from judicial review processes, should they occur.

Councillor Ottino expressed some objection, noting broad concern relating inequalities when some communities do not have the financial ability to mount robust objections to planning applications in the way other wards may. It was noted that requiring projects to provide modelling for possible scenarios could incur higher costs. The Chair acknowledged the matter but explained that his suggested recommendation is not speculative, but likely, as the review is ongoing, and costs are not yet accounted for. As such, the matter was noted as distinct from Councillor Ottino's broader concern around modelling all future projects.

The Committee discussed the proposed recommendation.

Councillor Jarvis clarified that the recommendation would not require any budget extension, just research within the existing workload of officers already employed by the Council. The Chair agreed and noted that the recommendation would be focused on encouraging more specific analysis to ensure the Council is better prepared if there were to be further delays.

Councillor Rowley noted that the recommendation may have already been accounted for by the ongoing work of officers and therefore found it to be unnecessary.

The Regeneration and Development Lead clarified that the Council had not yet priced in for delays resulting from another judicial review or appeal but could conduct some modelling based only on assumptions of inflation. As a result, it would be a high-level piece of analysis.

Councillor Jarvis seconded the recommendation. The Committee voted in favour of the recommendation.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendation(s) on the report to Cabinet:

- That Cabinet undertake high-level remodelling and assess potential impact of the judicial review appeal progressing to a hearing, particularly around timescales and future costings, to ensure the Council is better prepared and has a more informed basis for decision-making.

The Chair, in response to Councillor Muddiman's earlier address, confirmed that from the discussions during this meeting, the report to Cabinet was not seeking to delegate powers to make budgetary decision to officers; any decisions would be for Cabinet to make.

28. Scrutiny Work Plan

The Chair informed the Committee that an updated work plan had now been published.

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor informed the Committee that the work programme was published on the Council website and would be updated monthly to support alignment with other committee workstreams and to support transparency. It was also noted that any adjustments to the workplan would be agreed by the Chair.

The Committee **agreed** the workplan.

29. Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations

The Chair informed the Committee that he had attended the last meeting of Cabinet and explained that of the 8 recommendations put forward from the Scrutiny Committee, 6 were agreed in full, 1 was agreed in part, and 1 was rejected. The Chair provided a summary of Cabinet's decisions on all 8 of the recommendations, as detailed within the agenda.

The Committee **noted** Cabinet's responses to its recommendations.

Councillor Hollingsworth and the Regeneration and Development Lead left the meeting and did not return.

30. Endorsement of Recommendations from Working Groups

The Chair informed the Committee that the Climate and Environment Working Group had met on 22 July.

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor summarised the four recommendations made.

The Committee **endorsed** the recommendations from Working Groups.

31. Dates of future meetings

The Committee **noted** the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.23 pm

Chair
2025

Date: Tuesday 9 September

When decisions take effect:

Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired

Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued.

All other committees: immediately.

Details are in the Council's Constitution.