

**To:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 19 December 2019  
**Report of:** Scrutiny Committee  
**Title of Report:** Oxford's Waterways

| <b>Summary and recommendations</b>   |   |
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| <b>Purpose of report:</b>  | To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning Oxford's Waterways                                       |
| <b>Key decision:</b>   | No  |
| <b>Scrutiny Lead Member:</b>   | Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee   |
| <b>Cabinet Member:</b>   | Councillor Tom Hayes, Zero Carbon Oxford  |
| <b>Corporate Priority:</b>   | A Vibrant and Sustainable Economy, Meeting Housing Needs, Strong and Active Communities, A Clean and Green Oxford |
| <b>Policy Framework:</b>   | None  |
| <b>Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.</b> |   |

| <b>Appendices</b> |
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| None              |

### **Introduction and overview**

1. At its meeting on 05 November 2019, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report on Oxford's Waterways, the Oxford Waterways project and its planned next steps.
2. The Panel would like to thank Tim Wiseman, Oxford Waterways Coordinator, for supporting the meeting and compiling the report.

## Summary and recommendation

3. Tim Wiseman, Oxford Waterways Coordinator, introduced the report. The post of Oxford Waterways Coordinator had been established a year previously in recognition of the complexity of management and wealth of benefits the waterways could offer the City, which touched on almost all the Council's corporate priorities. Due to the wide-ranging nature of issues relating to the waterways and the complex map of responsibilities it was important that significant effort had been put into developing a partnership of key stakeholders, with a shared vision developed. The vision incorporated opportunities for the Council to contribute to the following corporate priorities: A Vibrant and Sustainable Economy, Meeting Housing Needs, Strong and Active Communities, A Clean and Green Oxford. Having built a partnership and identified the issues, the next step would be to begin delivering on the aims of the partnership. However, this work would be contingent on the temporary post of Oxford Waterways Coordinator being extended.
4. It is the view of the Committee that the Oxford Waterways Coordinator has been very successful in bringing together disparate groups with differing interests to achieve an agreed vision. Without further follow through, however, that work will not have a meaningful lasting benefit. Consequently, it is recommended that the post of the Oxford Waterways Coordinator be extended:

**Recommendation 1: That the post of Oxford Waterways Coordinator be extended for a sufficient duration to enable the benefits of the Oxford Waterways partnership to be realised.**

5. In response to the report presented the Committee's particular areas of scrutiny focused on a number of key areas:
  - Situating the Waterways within the Council's wider plans
  - Developing a position on 'boats as homes'
  - Increasing amenity for the Waterways
6. In addition to the above, the Committee makes a further eight recommendations

### **Situating the Waterways within the Council's wider plans**

7. As per recommendation 1, the Committee noted and welcomed the progress made through the work of the Oxford Waterways Coordinator in conflating the multiple strands of the waterways' contribution to Oxford and bringing visibility to the issues. It was recognised that hitherto the complex and cross-cutting nature of the waterways may have made inclusion within the Council's wider plans difficult, but the work undertaken by the Oxford Waterways project to date provides a foundation on which the Council can begin to include the waterways into its wider thinking and plans in an informed manner. Given the breadth of contribution the waterways can make to the City, it is the view of the Committee that the Council should make use of upcoming

opportunities to build in consideration of the needs and contributions of the waterways to its wider plans.

**Recommendation 2: Where appropriate and relevant, council strategies and policies will be updated to reflect the contribution of the waterways to the city. For example, the Local Plan, Infrastructure Delivery Plan, Housing and Homelessness Strategy, Green Spaces Strategy and Leisure Strategy**

8. The Council owns a number of assets associated with the waterways – land, structures, facilities on lease, areas of public realm. For example, Port Meadow Moorings or towpath land adjacent to Abbey Road. These sites each have their own maintenance costs and liabilities which have to be managed. Committee acknowledged that at some sites, the liabilities and costs may be high, yet agreed that these are valuable amenity and infrastructure assets where the wider benefits have to be recognised.
9. In addition, Committee agreed that beyond just those specific sites, the waterways more generally should be recognised as a piece of the city’s strategic infrastructure, delivering a wide range of benefits to the whole city. While Committee acknowledged that there are other statutory bodies and partners which hold maintenance and investment responsibilities, it agreed that at times the Council should also be prepared to contribute and invest in the waterways. Through this, it could influence improvements and help drive the maximum benefit for the city.

**Recommendation 3: That the importance of the City’s waterways is recognised as an infrastructure asset, and consideration is given to how the Council could maintain them through capital investment, alongside that of wider partners**

#### **Developing a position on ‘boats as homes’**

10. With relatively low up-front costs, close proximity to the City Centre and a unique environment living on the waterways was felt to have a number of strengths that can make it a viable and valuable choice for some people wanting to live in Oxford. Though clearly not suitable for all, in light of the challenge of housing costs in Oxford, the Committee welcomes the contribution boats make to low-cost housing.
11. Through discussion the Committee recognised the complexity associated with boats used as housing, but also felt that clarity on the Council’s position on the issue and its responsibilities is necessary. In the face of a growing reality on the number of people living permanently on boats in the city, the Committee felt that additional work is required to help inform the Council and its future work.
12. Whilst the Waterways Coordinator reported a number of actions to try and develop relationships with the boating community, detailed knowledge of those living on boats was reported to be limited. Two contributors to this situation were identified to be the independence and absence of cohesiveness amongst the boating ‘community’ itself, and a reticence on the part of live-aboard boaters to engage with the Council on the basis of past experiences.

13. The estimated size of the permanent population living on boats within the City was reported to be approximately 200 to 250 people across 180 households, but little was known regarding the breakdown of why people chose to live on boats and the suitability of existing provision for this lifestyle. Whilst for some people it was thought that living aboard boats was likely to be a lifestyle choice, it was also felt that for some it would likely to be out of financial necessity and may in small numbers be a source of hidden homelessness. The lack of information about the needs of this demographic is felt to be problematic in relation to the Council's response; it was pointed out that the lack of knowledge about the suitability of existing provision of mooring and infrastructure was significantly less than would be given to a planning application for 180 homes. It is the view of the Committee that this lacuna in knowledge should be addressed.

**Recommendation 4: Given the limited understanding of the diverse communities living on boats in the City, that the Council undertakes or commissions a study to develop a better understanding of the number of people living permanently on boats in the City, the varying reasons for living on boats, the provision of mooring sites and services and the suitability of existing infrastructure to support these communities.**

14. Though developing an understanding of those in the community living permanently on boats within the City is important, it is only a first step. In developing a clearer position on the role of boats as homes, the Council would also need to consider its legal obligations and responsibilities, such as those associated with being a housing authority, as a planning authority, Council duties under Equalities and Human Rights legislation and to ensure a consistency of approach across its multiple functions.
15. The Committee acknowledged that there are a range of arrangements by which people live on the waterways, from formally established permanent residential moorings to those that live more itinerantly without a home mooring. With growing numbers of people living afloat, particularly on the River Thames, it raises the question as to whether there are adequate moorings available which meet people's needs. The Committee indicated that Council should consider what its roles and responsibilities are in this matter, and how to influence/invest in additional provision (noting that there are other stakeholders / partners with responsibilities).
16. A similar conversation is also thought by the Committee to be necessary about the adequacy of infrastructure. It was reported to the Committee that boats must travel to Abingdon or Eynsham to access sewage emptying or hose-pipe water supplies. As above, it is important to recognise that the Council is well placed to commence discussion across stakeholders about the adequacy of infrastructure, but that does not imply that it would be responsible for delivering such infrastructure.
17. A particular concern which was raised was over the level of infrastructure provided by the Council on its own land where permanent residential mooring sites are operated (Walton Bridge Moorings, Rope Ham Moorings), providing moorings for 10 boats, but which did not provide water, electricity or sewage facilities. It is the view of the Committee that having become aware of this situation, the Council should review the adequacy of the infrastructure it provides across its permanent mooring sites in light of

the rent it charges. Furthermore, there is the additional site on city council-owned land adjacent to Redbridge Park & Ride where unofficial residential mooring takes place, but services are not provided.

18. A final area of concern identified was that of ensuring equitable access to any new mooring sites. It was felt strongly that left solely to market forces, those who might be most in need of access to new mooring sites may be squeezed out and the moorings available be taken up by those with greater alternative options. It is the view of the Committee that Council may also wish to consider how it could influence provision of mooring to those most in need.

**Recommendation 5: That consideration is given as to how the Council should best develop a policy position on the issue of boats used as housing and what roles and responsibilities the Council has, considering the following questions:**

- 1) Does Cabinet agree with the Scrutiny Committee that boats should be recognised and welcomed for the contribution they currently make to housing provision in the city?**
- 2) What are the implications for the Council with regard its role as both a housing and planning authority, its legal obligations, and how this would influence wider policy and strategy matters and the role of our other partners?**
- 3) Are there sufficient mooring sites and service infrastructure and what is the Council's role in addressing any shortfalls?**
- 4) Is the infrastructure at current Council-owned sites sufficient?**
- 5) Are there opportunities for the Council to develop approaches to prioritise the allocation of moorings to those most in need?**

### **Maximising the benefits of the Waterways**

19. The Committee also discussed a number of ideas by which the amenity of the waterways could be maximised for the benefit of all Oxford residents and visitors.
20. It was suggested by members of the Committee that the vision developed did not necessarily preclude consideration of how the waterways had impacted the City's culture and heritage, but that given the importance of that impact it could be made more explicit. It was felt that the lack of specific focus was reflected in the achievements of the project to date, which largely had not touched issues relating to local history and heritage. Due to the importance of that heritage, it is the view of the Committee that it should be specifically recognised and potentially backed up by funding.

**Recommendation 6: That the Council will recognise and back through future investment opportunities to invest and regenerate the waterways within the City, particularly with a view to bringing out their contribution to local history and culture and enhancing their potential as a leisure asset.**

21. A recent Guardian [article](#) exploring the health and social benefits of time spent near water led the Committee to a broader discussion of making use of the waterways as a health and wellbeing resource, and in particular whether greater use could be made of them in relation to social prescribing.

22. The Council supports the Health Walks initiative in Oxford, where people are able to come to a guided walk at a comfortable pace for all and which is between one and three miles in the company of others. The current publicity focuses on exploring green spaces, and whilst a number of the walks offered (for example Jericho, Christ Church Meadows, University Parks, Hinksey Park) provide opportunity for encountering so-called 'blue spaces' awareness of the additional benefits of blue spaces to mental wellbeing may perhaps not be known. It is the view of the Committee that Health Walk organisers should be informed of the particular benefits of proximity to blue spaces to enable them to plan their routes to include them.

**Recommendation 7: That the Council will support the use of the waterways as a health and wellbeing resource, supporting healthy communities. In particular, it will support efforts to explore how the waterways can contribute to social prescribing activity and other health initiatives such as health walks.**

23. By area, blue spaces are rare in Oxford compared to green spaces and urban environments yet the various blue space habitats contribute disproportionately to the diversity of flora and fauna locally. In discussing the potential for the waterways to contribute towards the Climate Emergency it was noted that many of the louder voices in raising the profile of the Climate Emergency – the Youth Strike and Extinction Rebellion, for example – actually speak about the Climate and Ecological Emergency. Having declared a Climate Emergency, taking steps to protect and enhance the habitat and biodiversity is an important part of the Council's response.

24. The Committee recognises that even within habitat management there is a complex web of stakeholders: volunteers who help to manage vegetation, the Environment Agency with powers over flood protection and water quality, and landowners. The Council is the default authority for issues such as litter, trees and environmental protection, particularly in areas where land is not adopted. As such, it is recognised that delivering a response will be complicated and should be undertaken in partnership with others.

25. Though more detailed work by those closer to the project will unearth other ideas, the Committee makes a number of suggestions as to means by which the Council might support the enhancement of the waterways as a habitat for fauna and flora:

- Development of a plan for management of the Council-owned waterways, particularly including tree and path management
- Promotion of opportunities to volunteer on the waterways amongst Council staff, including for staff voluntary days
- Active promotion of the Council's grants amongst groups who may be willing to run projects to improve habitat or ecology along the waterways

**Recommendation 8: That consideration is given to how the Council can deliver and/or support improvement initiatives on the waterways which contribute to wider efforts to combat the climate and ecological crisis**

26. The popularity of waterways as non-traffic routes for cycling and walking was acknowledged, and their potential for supporting increased usage was discussed. A programme of improvements have been delivered across River Thames routes and

more are underway on some sections of the Oxford Canal towpath. However, one barrier to greater usage was considered to be poor access at two key locations – Wolvercote Lock steps down from Godstow Road and the poor towpath conditions at Hythe Bridge. It is felt that to encourage greater take-up of sustainable forms it must be made as convenient as possible. Further, it is felt that greater access will also add to the overall amenity of the waterways. As such, it is recommended that the Council consider what it can do to improve this.

**Recommendation 9: That the Council identifies how it intends to increase access and use of the waterways by all in the city, particularly as routes for sustainable alternative transport modes such as cycling and walking, with particular consideration given to the issues at Wolvercote Lock and Hythe Bridge.**

### Further Consideration

27. Should the Committee wish to consider the progress of this issue, or any of the particular sub-issues it touches on, it will have the opportunity to add it to the Committee’s work plan for the forthcoming year. It is not anticipated that the Committee will wish to consider this item prior to then.

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