

**To:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 09 December 2020  
**Report of:** Scrutiny Committee  
**Title of Report:** Waterways

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned Waterways report
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Scrutiny Lead Member:</b>	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for a Safer, Healthy Oxford
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	All
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	Council Strategy 2020-24
<b>Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.</b>	

<b>Appendices</b>
None

### **Introduction and overview**

1. At its meeting on 03 November 2020, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report it has commissioned providing an update on the work of the Council regarding the Waterways.
2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities, for presenting the report and answering questions. The Committee would also like to thank Jo Colwell, Service Manager, Environmental Sustainability for supporting the meeting. Finally, the Committee wishes to register its special thanks to the author of the report, Tim Wiseman -

Waterways Coordinator, for the success he has made of the role and its sadness to hear of his upcoming departure.

### **Summary and recommendation**

3. Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for a Safer, Healthy, Oxford, said she was pleased to be able to introduce the report which recorded the positive action taken in response to the Committee's recommendations. She paid tribute to the outstanding contribution which had been made by Tim Wiseman. He had achieved "small miracles" by working closely with the City's boating community and identified a "myriad of issues" connected with the waterways for exploration and improvement. As a result of his work the relationship between the boating community and the Council was much improved and there was heightened awareness across Council departments of the potential or actual connection between them and the City's waterways.
4. The Service Manager for Environmental Sustainability went through the recommendations set out in the report and drew particular attention to some of them. The impact of the waterways on the new Local Plan had been significant and as had their impact in the consideration of individual developments. Officers across the Council were now much more aware of the value of and contribution which could be made by waterways throughout the City. To maximise and deliver the benefits of the waterways as an infrastructure asset required considerable investment and funding for officer post(s) to deliver.
5. The Waterways Coordinator's direct experience as someone who lives on a boat had been both enlightening and invaluable, not least in improving the relationship between the Council and the City's boating community. This had contributed to a better understanding of the facilities, or lack of them, for boat owners, particularly but not exclusively, for those who live aboard. Some of these issues had been picked up in the new Local Plan. There was a hope that there would be some vibrant cultural activity on the waterways in 2021, once the impact of Covid-19 had lessened. It was clear that the waterways were well used as a health and wellbeing resource. In relation to the recommendation concerning initiatives to combat the climate and ecological crisis, a bid had gone to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund.
6. In response to the presentation the Scrutiny Committee focused its discussion on the following, making makes 8 recommendations:
  - Continuing the successful work undertaken thus far
  - Provision of infrastructure, particularly for live-aboards
  - Wider issues

### **Continuing Success**

7. Endorsement of the success of the Waterways Coordinator in developing working relationships across the broad range of stakeholders, including those with whom the Council had previously had poor relations, was highlighted from all parties at the meeting: the Cabinet portfolio holder, Scrutiny members, the post-holder's

line manager, and the incoming Chair of the Oxford City Canal Partnership. The original report to Scrutiny references the 'resource it provides to create and to maintain strong relationships with external partners and to assist in coordinating activity' and 'due to the cross-cutting nature of the work, the waterways officer post also assists in coordinating activity within the council, working across team boundaries'.

8. The central role of the role of the Waterways Coordinator in developing and maintaining the relationships with multiple stakeholders – internal and external – through which to make progress on ensuring the multiple benefits of the waterways are realised is clear. It was, however, reported to the Committee that owing to the budget pressures faced by the Council in light of Covid-19, the current intention was not to recruit a replacement for the post and for it to expire, as planned, in September 2021.
9. The Committee is concerned at this news, and the prospect that the relationships built and successes thus far may slow or even reverse without continued resource by the Council. However, it also recognises the sharp financial reality the Council faces and makes a number of recommendations as to how the successes to date may be continued.
10. Given that Oxford's waterways form part of a wider network, which extends beyond the Council's boundaries, coordination between neighbouring councils is an important factor in maximising the potential benefit. The suggestion of the Scrutiny Committee is that before letting the role lapse completely, the Council investigate the possibility of sharing the post with neighbouring councils. This would not only have the benefit of creating closer coordination between councils, but would also spread the cost across participating councils.

***Recommendation 1: That the Council investigates the appetite amongst neighbouring authorities for establishing a shared Waterways Coordinator post***

11. As part of his address to the Committee, a challenge was levied to the Council by Ian Green along similar lines. In the absence of dedicated resource, the challenge of developing in partnership plans to maximise the benefit of the waterways is unlikely to be overcome. It was the suggestion that an important part of this would be strategic considerations of waterways development, and that in order to progress this a forum, led by the Council, should be established to ensure coordination of activity and policy between partners. The Committee is in agreement that without leadership by the Council, continued progress regarding the waterways is unlikely, and it supports the idea of administering a forum through which to coordinate activity as a relatively low-cost, high-return means of coordinating strategic waterways activity.

***Recommendation 2: That the Council establishes and administers a forum of key waterways stakeholders to coordinate strategic policy and activity.***

## **Provision of Infrastructure**

12. The Committee was generally supportive of the concept of boats being used as homes in the context of the high cost of accommodation within the city, and in particular welcomed the news that the development at Redbridge Paddocks

includes plans for moorings. However, at present, some basic infrastructure for live-aboards moored in Oxford is absent; the nearest place to empty rubbish, sewerage and take on fresh water is in Abingdon, which is a journey of approximately two and half hours each way and, for an average boat, needs to be undertaken every one to two months. Clearly, for the existing live-aboards in Oxford this is sub-optimal, but as more moorings are created the need for local water, sewerage and rubbish-disposal increases. The Committee is aware that providing infrastructure is not cost-free, but members suggested that if boats are truly to be considered homes, an equivalence of spending between those residents living on boats and those on land is justified, and that the current level of infrastructure is suggestive that the boat-dwellers may at present be under-served. The Committee wonders whether CIL funding for housing developments may be harnessed to put in such infrastructure.

13. The Committee is open-minded about where such infrastructure should be situated, but on the face of it the development at Redbridge Paddocks does appear to provide a good opportunity.

***Recommendation 3: That the Council ensures the provision of facilities for boats to dispose of waste, empty sewer tanks and take on fresh water at Redbridge Paddocks or an alternative venue locally.***

14. The development of moorings raises the question of who should be responsible for their ongoing management. The Committee recognises that relationships between boat-dwellers and the Council are much improved compared to previously, but it is concerned that Council management of new moorings may possibly be a cause of conflict. Instead, community-ownership or community-management models, whereby boat-owners themselves are responsible for the infrastructure is thought to be an opportunity for reduced conflict and community-empowerment. The Committee is keen that the appetite for and practicability of such models be explored with relevant stakeholders when decisions over management and ownership over waterways moorings are considered.

***Recommendation 4: That the Council explores the option of community ownership for moorings when ownership and management arrangements are decided.***

15. One contentious issue between residents near moorings and the residents of those moorings themselves concerns emissions. Boats are not included within the Clean Air Act, meaning they are able to emit gasses which would be deemed too damaging to allow a household to emit. It is clearly in the interests of boat-dwellers, their land-living neighbours and the Council to see an improvement in air quality, and whilst the provision of electric charging points will not automatically mean boat-dwellers will switch to cleaner technology, an absence of charging points provides no incentive at all to switch. Consequently, the Committee encourages the Council to consider where it may install electric charging points near high-risk areas, and where it may work with partners to encourage them to do likewise.

***Recommendation 5: That the Council incorporates the provision of electric charging points for boats into its strategic development plans for the waterways, particularly in those areas where moorings are in close proximity to housing and schools.***

16. Whilst the Committee focused discussion on a number of key priorities, it also recognised that there is a huge amount of policy to unpack to understand the implications and responsibilities of a policy position that welcomes and encourages the use of boats as homes within the city. In the report presented to the Committee it was stated that the most appropriate vehicle to do this would be through the Council's forthcoming refresh of its Housing and Homelessness Strategy. The Committee is keen that this is done.

***Recommendation 6: That the Council includes within its refreshed Housing and Homelessness Strategy a section to consider the implications and responsibilities arising from endorsing the use of boats as homes in Oxford.***

## **Wider Issues**

17. One general comment made was that the overall balance of plans for the waterways tended to focus on the city centre northwards. Whilst not wishing to deprioritise any of the proposals made for those areas, it was suggested that projects to support and enhance the waterways in the east and south of the city be developed.

***Recommendation 7: That the Council proactively seeks to increase the number of projects in waterways to the east and south of the city.***

18. The Committee discussed the importance of the cross-party motion on water quality agreed at Council on 05 October. Whilst it is recognised that the responsibilities arising from according the Thames bathing status fall almost exclusively with Thames Water, who were not participants in developing the Waterways Vision in 2019, non-polluted water is an important part of increasing the amenity of the river. As such, the Committee recommends that the vision be included to make reference to the Council's agreed wish to improve the quality of water in the Thames.

***Recommendation 8: That the Council refreshes the Waterways Vision document to reference the Council's motion on bathing water quality.***

## **Further Consideration**

19. It is not expected that Scrutiny will revisit this topic in the current civic year. Its consideration in the future will likely be dependent on the way in which the Council decides to manage the issues that arise from the waterways.

<b>Report author</b>	Tom Hudson
Job title	Scrutiny Officer
Service area or department	Law and Governance
Telephone	01865 252191
e-mail	<a href="mailto:thudson@oxford.gov.uk">thudson@oxford.gov.uk</a>

**Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 03/11/2020 concerning the Waterways report**

**Response provided by Cabinet Member for a Safer, Healthy Oxford, Councillor Louise Upton**

23

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Agree?</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>1) That the Council investigates the appetite amongst neighbouring authorities for establishing a shared Waterways Coordinator post</b>	Agree	The work programme with the Waterways Officer will be agreed to include contacting neighbouring authorities with a proposal outline to gauge the level of support.
<b>2) That the Council establishes and administers a forum of key waterways stakeholders to coordinate strategic policy and activity.</b>	Partially Agree	There are a range of forums in existence, working with key partners we will review the need for any new or additional meeting with stakeholders. This will align with the work in recommendation 1.
<b>3) That the Council ensures the provision of facilities for boats to dispose of waste, empty sewer tanks and take on fresh water at Redbridge Paddocks or an alternative venue locally.</b>	Agree	The Council has noted the lack of facilities within the City. Where feasible, the Council will encourage the provision of new facilities through instructing our planning officers, who have the key relationship with developers, to actively explore providing these amenities.
<b>4) That the Council explores the option of community ownership for moorings when ownership and management arrangements are decided.</b>	Agree	This will be explored where feasible, through research into models adopted elsewhere in the UK.
<b>5) That the Council incorporates the provision of electric charging points for boats into its strategic development plans for the waterways, particularly in those areas where moorings are in close proximity to housing and schools.</b>	Agree	Where feasible this will be explored, an opportunity may exist if there is scope to develop the community ownership model of mooring. It may require capital expenditure and needs detailed feasibility to understand if the desired outcome is possible at appropriate locations.

<p><b>6) That the Council includes within its refreshed Housing and Homelessness Strategy a section to consider the implications and responsibilities arising from endorsing the use of boats as homes in Oxford.</b></p>	<p>Agree</p>	<p>Council recognises that boats provide one of the few affordable housing options in the city. We will explore the implications in the next housing strategy refresh.</p>
<p><b>7) That the Council proactively seeks to increase the number of projects in waterways to the east and south of the city.</b></p>	<p>Disagree</p>	<p>At present the focus is on key waterways, the Thames/Isis and Oxford Canal. Other waterways within the city can be examined to understand the needs in those areas. However, with the limited resource currently available, priority is centred on the key waterways links. In due course this will be revisited.</p>
<p><b>8) That the Council refreshes the Waterways Vision document to reference the Council's motion on bathing water quality.</b></p>	<p>Agree</p>	<p>Reference can be made to this in the Waterways Vision document, while it must also be recognised that the key players on water quality are Thames Water and the Environment Agency.</p>