

Cabinet 16 March 2022

Address by Patricia Murphy:

“Oxford City Council and its development partners the University of Oxford have both declared a Climate Emergency. Why has OCC and its bid partners not sought to adapt the nearby existing Victorian Gas Works Bridge rather than construct a new bridge? There is little local demand for a new structure that represents embodied carbon and the loss of meadowland on one the few remaining stretches of river with green on both sides. The Thames wildlife corridor here includes the reclaimed Grandpont Nature Park and Oxpens Meadow, previously described by the Council as a major green asset.

We were told that adapting the existing bridge would be “too difficult”. Could you explain why it would be more difficult than constructing an expensive new bridge that will create pinch points under the railway bridge and reduce the area of green by introducing hard landscaping for structure and extensive footings. Has the Council investigated if the money could be switched to adapting the existing bridge, given that value for money is a major criterion and enhancement is also covered by the funds? Furthermore, the Osney Mead Masterplan, published by the University of Oxford in 2016, acknowledges this. I quote: “A bridge would be a large, high and very expensive new structure. The towpath underpass which links to the existing bridge crossing to the east, could provide a more viable solution.”

The funding under the Marginal Viability Funding Scheme is to “unlock housing”. So how the bridge will do this, given that the flood adjacent Osney Mead is currently not zoned for housing, nor has planning permission yet to be applied for? Why has the Council previously claimed the bridge was to “unlock housing” but in its recent press release justifies it as providing off-road cycle routes, which already exist?

The terms of the Funding state that it “...is not to be used when developers, or others, are able to pay for the infrastructure themselves.” Does this mean the University of Oxford is unable or unwilling to pay for the infrastructure, and what is the evidence that the Osney Mead housing development for university staff and students is contingent upon this bridge? What is the evidence base that the economic benefit of the bridge is genuinely additional: that is, that the development would not occur without this intervention? Is the intention to open up more land for housing?

Does the Council intend to recoup the money from the university, given that it is so well resourced? How has the Council demonstrated “evidence of involvement of local communities”, which is one of the criteria to the fund? Particularly, as it has been reported in the Oxford Mail that the contract was signed by a senior Council officer as an urgent decision, taken without approval from Councillors.”

Response from Cllr Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

“I would preface my remarks by saying that quite a substantial number of the assumptions in the questions are not correct.

Oxford City Council is acting as the agent for Oxfordshire County Council on this project. The project is being funded from Growth Deal funding, which was provided to the County Council for the sole purpose of providing a new crossing for the predicted increase in pedestrian and cycle traffic due to new developments in the West End. If it is not used for that purpose – a new crossing - it would need to be returned to the County Council.

The question quotes the terms for the Home England administered Housing and Infrastructure Funding (HIF); this is NOT the source of the funding for the proposed bridge.

The proposed bridge has been identified as a potential improvement to connectivity for active travel for several years. It was first proposed in the West End Area Action Plan, which was adopted in June 2008. The need for the bridge was reviewed again as part of the Local Plan 2036 and was confirmed in that Local Plan as being a means to improve walking and cycling connectivity, particularly between the proposed developments at Osney Mead and at Oxpens and the city centre beyond. Osney Mead Industrial Estate was allocated for development in the Oxford Local Plan 2036 for a mixed use development that includes residential use. The policy identifies the need for a new pedestrian and cycle bridge over the river to support this allocation.

The use of the Gasworks Rail Bridge as an alternative to a new bridge has previously been explored by the County Council and rejected by them, as it would require the alteration of the bridge parapet and of the northern access, and the widening and reducing of the gradient of the connecting path. The route along the Castle Mill Stream has limited width and is not suitable to be designated for cycling, and therefore a further route over the Stream and through the Meadows would need to be created, which would need to be raised to avoid flooding, causing harm to the Meadows themselves. The resulting route would not provide a direct and convenient connection between Osney Mead and Oxpens and the City Centre beyond for existing and future use predicted by the County Council.

The proposed bridge would allow the Meadow and the Nature Park to be enjoyed by more people, while providing a new, convenient and secure route for active travel. The impact on the Meadow and the Nature Park to accommodate the bridge construction is minimal.

The Growth Deal funding is expected to be a revolving fund ('expected' in the sense that that is what it is set up to do). Future development at Osney Mead will be expected to contribute to the costs of infrastructure that facilitates that development. The mechanism for this will depend on what system is in force at the time (government reforms are still pending), but could include contributions through CIL, s106, s278 or through another form of voluntary undertaking.

When the bridge scheme reaches the appropriate stage, expected to be in early summer 2022, formal public consultation will take place in advance of seeking planning permission.

To reiterate my words at the beginning, the City Council is acting as the agent for the County Council here. It is not in our gift to transfer the money to somewhere else; it is not our money, it is theirs.”

This page is intentionally left blank