

To: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 08 June 2022
Report of: Head of Community Services
Title of Report: Oxford Waterways Project Update

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	An update report on the progress made against the Scrutiny Committee's previous recommendations accepted by Cabinet at its meeting on 09 December 2020.
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member with responsibility:	Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Health and Transport Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks
Corporate Priority:	Support Thriving Communities
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation(s):	
1. The Committee notes and comments on the update.	

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Recommendations Update

Introduction and background

1. The previous Waterways Coordinator post expired in November 2020.
2. Following concerns around the condition of some of the Council's waterways assets, a revised role description was introduced in June 2021 to provide focus and coordination on developing a framework for asset management.
3. The role maintains the original framework which was put in place alongside the Environment Agency and Canal and Rivers Trust, through the 'Oxford Waterways – A Shared Vision' document.
4. There is, however, now a greater focus in managing a number of assets that are either deteriorating or the condition needs to be identified.

5. This report provides an update to Scrutiny's previous recommendations to Cabinet, which were accepted at the meeting 09 December 2020 (**Appendix 1**).

Waterways Update

6. In December 2020, Scrutiny Committee put forward a set of recommendations to Cabinet.
7. Given the health and safety issues that have been identified, the priorities of the Waterways Officer have shifted from these recommendations to get a framework in place to manage this long term. More detail is outlined below.
8. The established post has been funded to cover oversight across the Environmental Sustainability, Communities, and Property Services teams.
9. The table in Appendix 1 provides a summary of activity delivered/initiated within the waterways programme since the last update for Scrutiny, for information.

Recommendation 1: Investigate appetite amongst neighbouring authorities for establishing a shared waterways coordinator post

10. In May 2021, the Waterways Officer post was filled through a two year secondment, which expires in June 2023.
11. The role core scope is to focus on the Council's assets along the waterways, and how these are managed, which are now turning to a poor condition.
12. Ongoing dialogue continues with neighbouring authorities and relevant agencies where required.

Recommendation 2: The Council establishes and administers a forum of key waterways stakeholders to coordinate strategic policy and activity

13. The Oxford Water Safety Group is already in place to review safety management along Oxford's waterways, and has helped on boat safety campaigns, producing the wild water code, and installing smoke alarms in boats.
14. A number of fora already exist, which the Council is linked into and there was no demand among partners for the Council to establish a further body. A number of the partnership bodies that the Waterways Officer attends are set out in para 38 below.

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

15. The Council continues to explore additional mooring provision and, where appropriate, will work with housing and property services to incorporate moorings into new developments and regeneration projects.

16. A basic feasibility study for moorings with the required basic infrastructure has been done at Redbridge Paddock, and work is being undertaken to review the Port Meadow mooring infrastructure.

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

17. A report commissioned by Collaborative Housing, sponsored by the Council and Oxfordshire Community Land Trust, was launched in March 2022.

18. This set out the following:

- A review of the current situation & Oxford's needs
- Planning Policy & legal considerations
- A review of potential sites and opportunities
- A review of potential models and approaches
- A basic feasibility study for Redbridge Paddock site

19. The report covers a review for potential permanent, leisure, and continuous cruiser mooring opportunities, however not all of these sites are owned by the Council.

20. Any future additional mooring provision will need to seek necessary funding to undertake full feasibility work and will require funding to implement. There is currently no designated budget, and will need to go through the standard mechanisms in which to gain approval.

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

21. The Council has an EV team, which are focusing on electric vehicle infrastructure in Oxford. We will explore any potential for suitable sites for charging points and, where possible, work with partners such as the Canal & Rivers Trust on sites such as the Oxford Canal.

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.

22. The refreshed Housing and Homelessness Strategy is still in draft format. Work is ongoing with Housing Services to incorporate a section which draws reference to the use of boats as homes in Oxford.

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

23. This recommendation was rejected by Cabinet, citing limited resource meant focus needed to be put toward priority areas in the centre of Oxford, along the Thames/Isis and Oxford Canal.

24. The priority continues to focus on health & safety elements of some of the Council infrastructure assets; more information can be found below.

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

25. Designated Bathing Water Status has now been obtained for the Wolvercote Mill Stream. Reference to wild swimming will be incorporated into the Thriving Communities strategy.

26. The Waterways Vision document provides a good foundation for the elements that the waterways cover for the public. This will be updated to reflect the new work streams that have opened up.

Reducing accidents for swimmers and users of our waterways

27. Since the pandemic, there has been a revitalised interest in connection to green space, nature, and outdoor leisure activities. Oxford's waterways have played a big part, with people exploring new walking and cycling routes, local green space, and there has been a significant uptake in wild swimming.

28. A number of formerly decommissioned bathing areas have been identified in the last 18 months as requiring significant works to the site to improve health and safety for users. For example, the likes of Tumbling Bay & Long Bridges (now decommissioned former bathing places) have embankments which are either failing or beginning to fail, and pose a serious health and safety risk to users of the sites.

29. Land ownership along Oxford's waterways is complex, with multiple landowners, riparian owners with responsibilities, and sections where there is no registered landowner. The Council has various records for its riparian and ownership responsibilities, however no centralised database of assets it is responsible for. Similarly, there is no condition surveys or management system in place.

30. This can increase Council liabilities in the event of an accident, and also takes up a significant amount of officer time in cases which can be complex. The Waterways Officer is working with partners and stakeholders to address some of the identified issues, and in the last twelve months have put some short term safety measures in place. Looking long term, the Council is looking to compile an asset register onto a database so that there is a definitive list of our responsibilities along the waterways. From this, the Council will undertake a condition survey of identified assets, in order to have a costed, long-term maintenance plan.

31. Whilst the work outlined above is required in order to get a better understanding of the Council's waterways responsibilities, any budget to fulfil these works will be subject to approval.

Bathing Water Status

32. In 2022 the council, in partnership with the Oxford Rivers Project and Thames 21, were officially awarded Designated Bathing Water Status for a section of the Wolvercote Mill Stream.

33. Designation means that the Environment Agency undertakes weekly water quality monitoring at the site, monitoring for e.coli and enterococci (commonly associated with faecal matter).
34. The local authority has the duty to inform the public on water quality. The site is in its first year of investigation, which will run from May till the end of September. Information on the bathing water can be found on the bathing profile and signage has been put up at the site to inform.
35. A designated site does not mean that this area is fit or safe to swim in; designation is focused on monitoring water quality in order to inform the public on water quality, and long term will enable relevant agencies and organisations to plan solutions to improve river health. Risks still apply to wild swimming, both at the designated site and city wide, and as such the council does not actively promote any sites as safe to swim in.
36. The Wild Water Code was produced by the Council, in partnership with the Oxford Water Safety group. This outlines the risks associated with wild swimming, and some of the considerations users should make before entering the water. More details are available on the waterways section of the Council website, and have been put up in areas that attract wild swimmers. This does not mean that we promote swimming, but inform users of the risks if they do choose to enter the water.
37. We will be doing a series of social media posts over the course of the bathing water season to inform the public what bathing water means, and also give reference to the Wild Water Code.

Stakeholders and Partnerships

38. To enable an oversight and integration into the management of Oxford's waterways, the council is now integrated into or has established a range of partnerships both internally and externally:
- Waterways Steering Group (internal)
 - Ock Catchment Partnership
 - Oxford Water Safety Group
 - River Users Group 1 & 2
 - Canal and River Trust Hythe Bridge Working Group
 - Oxford Rivers Project
 - Bathing Water Status (EA, Thames Water)
39. Further to this, there are numerous landowners and interested local community groups that have a vested interest in the waterways and infrastructure. The council is committed to work and engage with our stakeholder groups to help inform our work and decision making process.

Challenges

40. A number of challenges exist to undertake the above and below mentioned work streams. There is currently no ring fenced budget to deliver these works, so delivery of these projects is dependent on obtaining funding.

41. As mentioned, the Council cannot promote wild swimming. However, there are ways in which we can provide information on the risks, to allow safer consideration if people are undertaking this activity. We also work with stakeholders and users to review the safety infrastructure provided on site, including replacement of ladders and life-saving equipment.

42. Undertaking works at sites such as Tumbling Bay can be time sensitive. For example works need to be carried out within timeframes set out in the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Act 1975. Some sites are also prone to flooding, and safe working can delay delivery for some of these projects.

Summary of Key Activity so far

43. A key benefit of having established the Waterways Officer post is the additional resource it provides to create and to maintain strong relationships with external partners and to assist in coordinating activity. This has continued, in particular working with the Environment Agency and Canal & River Trust, with good working relationships established at a local operational and a wider corporate level.

44. Similarly, 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 and assisting with complex and time-consuming issues.

45. The 'Vision for Oxford's Waterways' document will receive a refresh to reflect work that has been taken, and the council will look to focus on.

Financial implications

46. There is currently no ring fenced budget to deliver the works outlined in this report, so delivery is dependent on obtaining funding.

Legal issues

47. If not properly maintained, accidents as a result of health and safety issues may increase Council liabilities.

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Background Papers: None