

Council received an Address from Dan Glazebrook, a representative from Friends of Grandpont Nature Park.

Almost 2000 people, the vast majority of them local residents, have now signed the petition against 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 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.

The problem is, to reach the bridge from Osney Mead, users would 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 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 2021, as it would cause further flooding elsewhere. Stantec's 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, as it utterly fails to provide the new floodproof connection from Osney Mead across the river without which housing cannot be built on the site and which was the whole point of the project in the first place. Indeed, the diversion of £1.5million Homes England funding for precisely such a floodproof route out of Osney Mead to instead build connecting paths for the bridge in Grandpont Nature Park means the Council now stands in breach of the terms of that grant and the criteria under which it was allocated, a matter we are pursuing with Homes England themselves.

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. Surely 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.

I would also like to address the issue of the University's funding commitments to the scheme. A spokesman for the University told the Oxford Mail back in January that, the University, quote, "last year agreed to make a contribution of around 10 per cent

of the cost of the new bridge after learning that cost increases had put its viability at risk.”

10% at that time equated to more than £1 million of the project’s projected costs. If the University had already committed more than a million pounds last year, why is this financial commitment not appearing in the figures before us today? Why is the public purse being asked to guarantee the full £3.7million in increased costs, and not, say, £2.7 million, given that a million from the University is already in the bag? Have the University now reneged on this commitment? And if the Council is willing to commit the entirety of the increased costs from the public purse, what incentive is there for the University to contribute any money at all?

Finally I would also like to address the issue of Balfour Beatty’s position in the delivery of the scheme. If all goes according to plan, Balfour Beatty are set to be awarded the construction contract next month. Balfour Beatty are a notorious company. They are involved in the imposition of near-slavery conditions on their migrant workforce in Qatar; just four years ago they were fined £49 million for massive fraud against the US government after it was revealed they had been systematically falsifying data in order to get bonus payments - and in this country their failure to comply with statutory safety requirements led in 2020 to the death of one construction worker and serious injuries to another, according to a ruling by the Health and Safety Executive last year.

But as well as being criminally unethical, they are also just not very good builders. On trustpilot, they are rated ‘bad’ with just 1.7 stars out of 5 and student residents have had to be moved out of their accommodation in Bethnal Green recently due to significant defects which have been blamed on the contractor, and which have cost its owner over £34million to address.

Why is the Council so keen to work with these incompetent criminals that it is prepared to set aside its usual tendering process and guarantee the contract to Balfour Beatty 30 without any tendering at all? And is it’s willingness to do so the reason why the company feels confident enough to hike its bill by over 35%, from £10 to £14 million in just a few months?

After all, the company do have form here - in 2016, one of their employees revealed how they had been extorting the taxpayer by systematically inflating their costs. The company responded by sacking the whistleblower, for which they were later forced to pay £137,000.

I will end there but 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 at gnptrees@gmail.com

More information is also available at our website - savegnp.org

Councillor Hollingsworth responded to the address from the member of the public.

This bridge has long been part of the policy and placemaking proposals for the West End, all of which have been consulted on widely and at length, debated in Full Council, and then adopted as formal documents.

The West End Area Action Plan, adopted by the City Council in June 2008, sought “A new pedestrian and cycle bridge across the Thames to join Oxpens Field to the Thames towpath is proposed. This would link the West End to Osney Mead and the West Oxford Cycle Route. Improvements will also be made to the route running east from the pedestrian bridge.

The key document of the then Local Plan, the **Oxford Core Strategy**, was adopted in March 2011. It made clear that it sought “A new Thames cycle and pedestrian bridge” in this area.

In November 2013 the **Oxpens SPD** – Supplementary Planning Document, something which provides further, detailed guidance to supplement existing policies within a Local Plan – was adopted by the City Council. This explains in detail what is proposed and what the objectives are for the new bridge.

“A new bridge crossing the Thames (Isis) should be provided to enhance opportunities to move between Oxpens and the wider area, notably the Grandpont Nature Reserve, and residential areas up/down stream on the opposite side of the river. Indicative locations for the proposed bridge crossing are illustrated on the Development Framework Plan and Illustrative Masterplan. The exact location of the bridge is to be determined and the Environment Agency must be consulted on the design.”

The maps that are the Development Framework Plan and the Illustrative Masterplan in the 2013 **Oxpens SPD** include the proposed bridge in almost exactly the location for which planning permission was submitted and approved.

The current **Oxford Local Plan 2036** was adopted by Oxford City Council in June 2020. Policy SP2 says “The masterplan [for the Oxpens site] should consider in greater detail how and when a new pedestrian and cycle bridge will be delivered linking this site with the other side of the river.”

The current detailed Supplementary Planning Document for this area is the **West End and Osney Mead SPD**, which was adopted by Oxford City Council in November 2022. It says that the ‘Oxpens River Bridge’ is one of the “Key Infrastructure priorities in relation to movement” for the site.

The bridge that has been proposed, consulted on and whose principle has been part of numerous formal policies adopted by this Council for twenty years now has planning permission and technical approval for the structure and a route has been identified to deliver the bridge. Grandpont Nature Park will remain for the very most part entirely unaltered. The proposals will deliver biodiversity net gain and maintain the level of tree canopy cover in the area in accordance with national and local planning policies.

The path through Grandpont is already well used and with further development in the West End the level of use is forecast to increase. Work was done to look at the options to floodproof the tow path under the rail bridge but they have not been taken forward as there is not yet funding available for them. That does not mean the route will not continue to be used the rest of the time, and the pathworks and the proposed bridge will provide an attractive and legible route across the river to the city centre.

The other bridges across the Thames will remain. The potential to improve the Gasworks Rail bridge was considered by the County Council in 2016-17 and discounted as a workable option. Further review has highlighted considerable

challenges, particularly with the footpath alongside Castle Mill Stream which is too narrow to accommodate cycling and the alternative route over the Castle Mill Stream bridge which would require alterations to create a hardened path and altered levels across the protected Meadow.

The Council procured Balfour Beatty through the local authority framework known as the S.C.A.P.E. to undertake pre-construction services as part of the preparation of the project and the planning process. The local authority framework carries out vetting work on all contractors that it works with. The City Council will pursue a tendering process for a contractor for the construction of the bridge through another standard framework that includes a competitive process.

The proposed bridge provides the opportunity for a new and convenient route across the river, designed specifically for the location and to support the placemaking that will support the development of the West End as a vibrant quarter of the city and connect to other parts of Oxford to the south and west of the city centre. As were the objectives of the bridge first proposed by this Council 20 years ago.