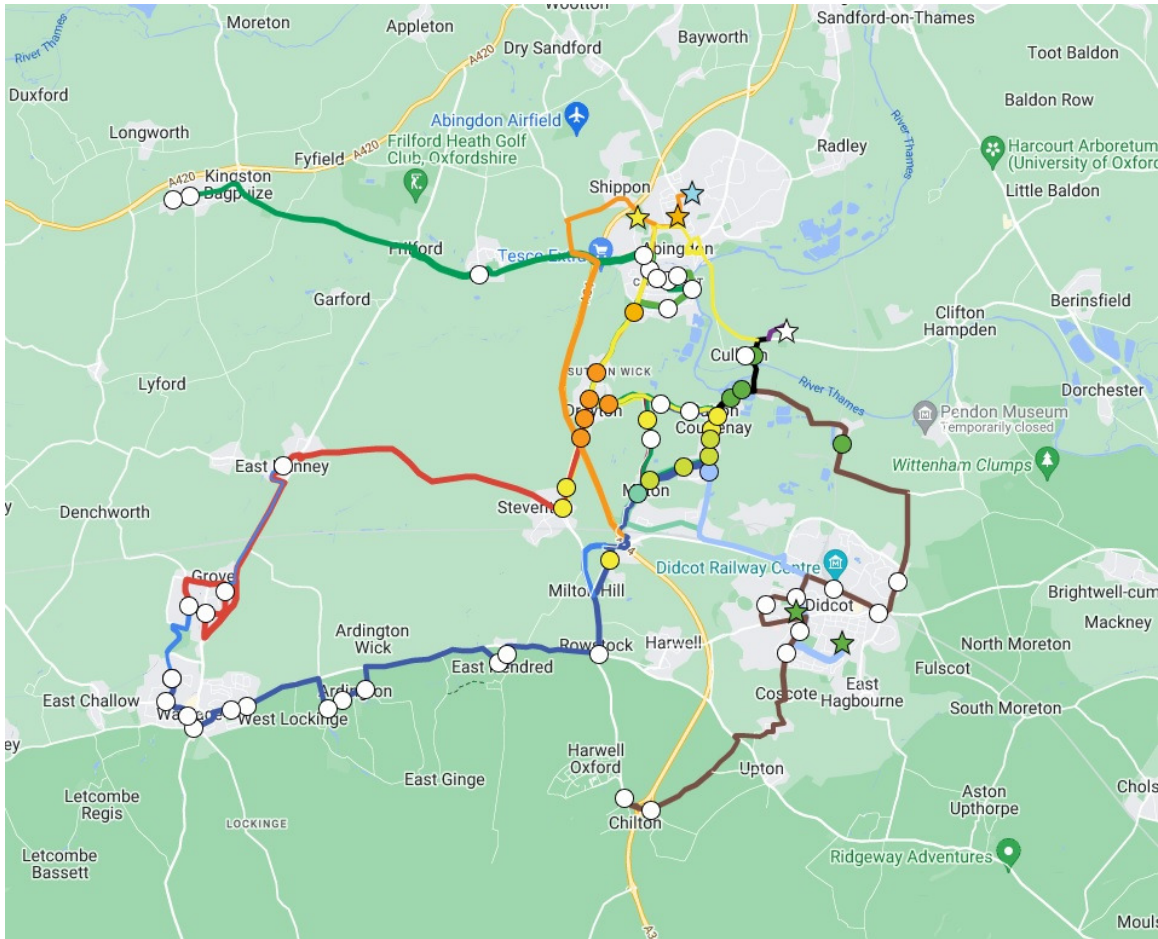


Why a new bypass and bridge across the Thames are needed for Culham

by Jonathan Alcantara

I am responsible for the "Culham Bus Club", which organises transport for Europa School in conjunction with Oxfordshire County Council. Our combined bus routes transport 500 pupils daily to six schools: Europa School (Culham), John Mason School (Abingdon), Larkmead School (Abingdon), Fitzharrys School (Abingdon), Didcot Girls School (Didcot) and St Birinus School (Didcot).



The school buses save parents' time, which enables them to work full-time, and also reduces traffic on the roads for the school run. The main risk to successful school bus operation is the enormous amounts of traffic now on the roads that the buses need to use, and especially the pinch points around the Thames crossings. These pinch points also impact those who continue to drive their children to school by car, as well as those commuting to work.

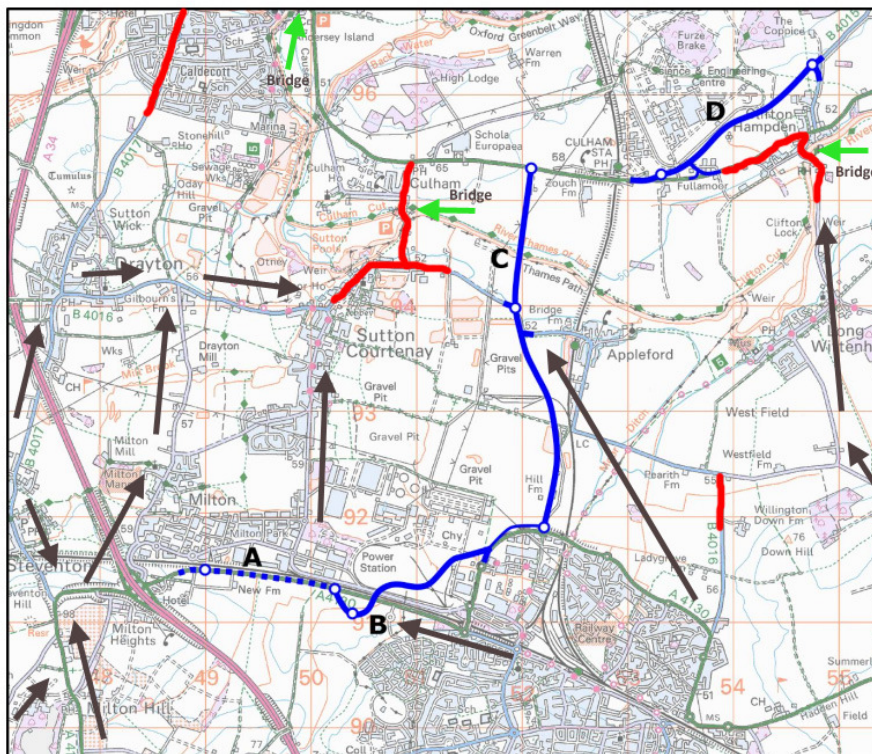
Four of our routes are dependent on the one-lane bridge between Sutton Courtenay and Culham, while one other depends upon the one-lane bridge at Clifton Hampden.

Because of population increase due to house-building, the morning traffic has increased dramatically since the start of these routes in 2018. This has led to a substantial increase in the size of the queues to the bridges, especially in Sutton Courtenay. The result of this has been the pushing back of the route start earlier and earlier, impacting the time pupils have to sleep.

	Bus 8: Wantage	Bus 12: Grove	Bus 6: Southmoor	Bus 5: Chilton
2018	7:14	7:11	7:09	7:13
2019	7:07	7:05	7:04	7:06
2020	7:07	7:13	7:00	7:06
2021	7:07	7:13	7:00	7:06
2022	7:07	7:05	7:00	7:06
2023	7:01	7:05	6:55	6:56

As can be seen from the above table, on Bus 8 we are 13 minutes earlier than when we started in 2018, on Bus 12 it is 6 minutes earlier (8 minutes earlier than 2020), on Bus 5 it is 17 minutes earlier, and on Bus 6, 14 minutes earlier than in 2018. This is entirely due to the bridge traffic in Sutton Courtenay. (Covid traffic reduction allowed for a relaxation of the time for Bus 12 in 2020, but this evaporated by 2022.)

The Europa School has a wide catchment covering the southern part of Oxfordshire. For those families living in Wantage, Grove, Harwell, Drayton, Steventon, Chilton, Milton, Didcot, Sutton Courtenay there are only two ways to cross the Thames get to Culham. One either enters Abingdon from the south or west and drives through central Abingdon, which is very congested every morning, or one takes the bridge at Sutton Courtenay. The Drayton Road into Abingdon is so heavily congested in the mornings that it can take 30 minutes to an hour to traverse it (a distance of only 1 mile from bottom to top). Most drivers from the south seem to opt for Sutton Courtenay bridge, which can be reached either via Drayton, Milton, or Appleford.



Map of traffic to the A415 in Culham, with the proposed bypass in blue and traffic in grey. Current queues are in red, bridges are marked in green.

Due to the lack of other options, drivers queue for 15-30 minutes at the one lane bridge in Sutton Courtenay, where lights allow for alternating traffic.

If there is any regional traffic incident, for example a road closure in Abingdon, or a problem on the A34, the queues can grow to the size where the delays can be as long as one hour. When the bridge closes, as in the recent floods, the diversion route through Abingdon (the only one available since both one-lane bridges flood easily) took more than two hours, making hundreds of pupils late for school and missing hours of their education.

The new bypass and bridge would solve the problem in a stroke. Because it is a two lane bridge, there won't be any queuing to wait for a traffic light for alternating traffic to cross the bridge. Traffic will instead flow across the Thames in both directions. A modern bridge is also less likely to close due to flooding. For motorists arriving from the southwest, across the Milton Interchange, there will be no more reason to drive into the narrow and slow villages of Milton and Sutton Courtenay. Only drivers from Drayton would still logically continue to drive via Drayton Road to Sutton Courtenay. Even then, that traffic should not queue up in Sutton Courtenay as now, since drivers can opt to continue on Appleford Road to the new bridge. Meanwhile all other drivers from the southwest should prefer the new bypass which avoids all villages to go directly to the new bridge. Drivers from Didcot and the southeast should no longer drive through Appleford, this village is also avoided by the new bypass, which comes off the Didcot ring road around Ladygrove.

Therefore, the new bypass should produce flowing traffic between the Milton Interchange and the A415 in Culham that bypasses Sutton Courtenay, Milton and Appleford. The queues in Sutton Courtenay should disappear, as nobody will need to queue beyond those people who continue to use the old bridge (for example: some of the school buses). The section of the bypass marked D on the map, which bypasses Clifton Hampden, will also help with queues that develop at the Clifton Hampden lights in the afternoons. These slow down the school buses that head eastbound and northeastbound from the schools.

The claim that the new road will increase queues makes no sense: we already have increasing traffic and increasing queues, without the new bypass and bridge. This increase is caused by the new housing across the area. The main cause of the current queues is the eighteenth century one-lane bridge. This one-lane bridge prevents traffic from flowing between the Milton Interchange and the A415 in Culham. Removing this blockage will enable traffic flow and resolve the current huge queues. The bridge will not attract new traffic: we already have large numbers of cars needing to cross the Thames northbound, and the traffic will simply move from a one-lane bridge with alternating traffic to a proper two lane bridge with flowing traffic.

The school is of course not the only reason people drive from Milton Interchange to the A415 in Culham. Many are going to work, towards Oxford or Abingdon, or the science park in Culham. The same logic as outlined above applies to all motorists from the area served by Milton Interchange or Didcot who need to cross the Thames towards the A415 in Culham. At present, the one-lane bridges designed for horse and carriage are the main reason for long queues for all traffic wishing to cross the Thames northbound between Abingdon and Wallingford. There is a need for a modern two-lane bridge across the Thames, and there is also a need for a bypass that can take drivers from Milton Interchange to that bridge, without the need to drive through the slow and narrow villages of Milton, Sutton Courtenay and Appleford.