

Public Question to Performance, Assets and Strategy Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 15 July 2026.

Mr C. Davidson

My question concerns a critical vulnerability in this council's asset management governance—specifically, the financial and legal liabilities arising from a reliance on flawed, unverified and unused mapping data during operational workflows.

For over twenty years, my home has been subjected to recurring, accidental incursions by council teams. The root cause of these failures is not staff misconduct or incompetence; it is a systemic workflow vulnerability. Operational teams execute maintenance, housing, or contractor works professionally, but they do so while relying on assumptions of ownership rather than digital maps.

When a public authority alters private property based on flawed data, it introduces immediate corporate legal risks and escalating financial liabilities. Yet, for two decades, the executive response has been to rely on temporary internal memos or to add static labels to maps that operational staff are not legally mandated to cross-reference before crossing a physical boundary.

Furthermore, the executive has recently attempted to stall direct communication on this matter by (according to information shared with me by Daniel Zeichners office) citing active Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) cases. This is a profound misrepresentation of regulatory procedure. The LGSCO's own Manual for Councils explicitly encourages 'Early Resolution' while investigations are live, even maintaining dedicated case-closing metrics for authorities that fix faults mid-stream. To freeze operational review under the guise of sub judice rules is an administrative choice to delay accountability, not a statutory necessity.

Memos and unread map labels have failed to protect residents or the council's financial exposure for twenty years. The only permanent, zero-cost solution is a mandatory verification policy requiring staff and contractors to cross-reference ownership maps or written (e.g. email, text etc.) address confirmations before initiating any works.

My question to the Executive Councillor and the Committee is this:

Given that the Ombudsman explicitly encourages early local resolution, and given the long-term financial and legal liabilities of recurring data-driven property incursions, and given the fact that sending memos to group heads has been tried and doesn't work, why has the executive consistently resisted implementing a mandatory, zero-cost ownership and job validity verification safeguard to protect both Cambridge residents and the council's own corporate risk profile?

Cabinet member response (Councillor Martin Smart)

The Council takes these concerns seriously and has acted on them.

Following the incident in which contractors incorrectly fixed a street sign to a boundary wall at your property, you swiftly received an apology in person and in writing. The Council carried out repairs to make good the damage including colour matching brickwork in lieu of compensation at your request and to your satisfaction. On-site verification checks using digital boundary maps were completed with the contractor when the works were commissioned. Unfortunately, the sign was placed in the wrong location when the work was subsequently carried out.

The Council has put in place additional safeguards to significantly reduce the risk of any incidents reoccurring at your property and implemented suggestions it received from you. These include enhanced warnings in operational systems, and on digital mapping/boundary software, and briefings about your property for all relevant managers and teams. All managers have been instructed to take responsibility for ensuring these additional controls specifically related to your property are followed in their service areas.

As a result of the above steps, mandatory ownership verification checks have been put in place for council commissioned works in the immediate vicinity of your property.

Why a blanket requirement is not appropriate

The proposal for blanket mandatory ownership verification prior to all council works being undertaken has been considered on its merits. The Council issues thousands of work instructions each year across grounds maintenance, tree works, waste and street cleansing, public realm and housing repairs. Applying a mandatory ownership check to all of them would be disproportionate and would not achieve the desired outcome.

Existing operational processes already require responsibility, authority or ownership to be established prior to new requests being undertaken or new works being commissioned. To the best of the Council's knowledge the concerns that have been raised in the question relate to a single property where significant additional assurance has now been put in place. As such introducing a blanket requirement for ownership verification would not be proportionate and would not represent value for money.

The verification of property ownership and boundaries can be complex, incur costs, including legal fees, and is not necessary in most instances. In some circumstances, particularly near and around public highways verifying the ownership of land can also be indeterminate.

When verification is required, Land Registry boundary information is used though it provides only an approximate guide. Under the General Boundaries Rule (Section 60 of the Land Registration Act 2002), the red line on a title plan only shows the approximate position of a property's boundary, which typically has a mapping tolerance of 0.5 to 1.0

metres. Boundary verification is therefore best informed by on-site checks prior to works being undertaken - as is currently the case when required. In addition, the relevant consideration is more often than not whether the Council has a responsibility for land or an asset, rather than who ultimately owns the freehold.

It is therefore important to distinguish between ascertaining property ownership and its management or occupation by third parties, and the checks that services already undertake to establish whether the Council has a responsibility, the legal authority or a legitimate basis to carry out works.

The examples below demonstrate that the Council does verify ownership and does use digital mapping data during operational workflows, when that is required or necessary.

- **Tree-works:** works to a tree that is not recorded on the Council's tree or asset database would require the location and responsibility for that tree to be established prior to commencement.
- **Ground maintenance:** routine work is undertaken against established area schedules and maintained-land information. When a request falls outside those areas and prior to any works being instructed, responsibility or ownership would need to be established. This may involve digital maps or Land Registry boundary information in conjunction with on-site checks where necessary.
- **Fly-tipping:** reports are assessed to establish whether waste is on land for which the Council has an enforcement or clearance responsibility. Fly-tipping on private land would not ordinarily pass the triage process without an appropriate legal or operational basis and, where relevant, the necessary permission.
- **Public realm:** works to install or repair street furniture, signs and other public realm assets must first be linked to an identified Council responsibility or instruction. When the location of an asset or boundary is unclear or uncertain, it would be resolved prior to works proceeding including through on-site checks, rather than being assumed from a physical location on a digital map register or database.
- **Contractor works:** contractors work to defined instructions, specifications or work areas. If after the necessary pre-works checks the extent of the Council's responsibility is uncertain, the matter would be referred to the instructing officer rather than the contractor determining responsibility or ownership themselves.
- **Graffiti removal:** the council aims to remove graffiti from public land within five days of receiving a report. The removal of graffiti from private land or buildings requires the landowner or occupier to provide written consent.
- **Housing repairs:** verification of ownership is not generally used when conducting cyclical repair works to council owned properties or council homes as ownership and responsibility is already established and works are commissioned by property surveyors.

The Council's position

The Council is responsible for putting reasonable safeguards in place, learning from incidents and strengthening procedures where appropriate based on good evidence. The existing arrangements will continue to be reviewed through ongoing management, assurance and audit processes. Where appropriate, the Council will also continue to act on feedback from residents, businesses and local partners.

The Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer remain satisfied that the current approach is appropriate and proportionate to the scale and nature of the Council's operational activity and risk. The Council does not intend to revisit its position in the absence of substantive new evidence.

While the Council strives to constantly improve its operational processes and eliminate mistakes, they can occur from time to time. That is what unfortunately happened in relation to the street sign at your property. The Council subsequently offered a sincere apology, made amends, and put in place additional safeguards to ensure it should never happen again.

The Council will co-operate fully with any investigation the Ombudsman decides to undertake.