

Alasdair De Voil – Address to Council

Oxford Visitor Information Centre

This is a follow up to previous request that the full Council address how and why it is appropriate to continue its funding of a company which is not delivering a fair, transparent and impartial service viz. Visit Oxfordshire Ltd which runs Oxford visitor information centre and its associated websites on behalf of the city and county councils.

In my last address at full council, Cllr Colin Cook stated that by nature of the council's partnership agreement with Visit Oxfordshire Ltd, "the council is not legally responsible for the visitor centre". However, after investigating the circumstances of that rather suspicious looking partnership agreement, I learned that the Council never followed its own procurement handbook to tender this service as it's claimed and that the Council never actually procured the tourist info services. As that's the case, consequently, we should conclude that in fact the city Council is in fact responsible on some level for the visitor info services partnerered (including circumstances and complaints about how info is presented at the visitor info centre and on its website).

It seems very odd for the council to continue funding a company by over 200K p.a. which is the object of repeated vociferous complaints made by the kinds of businesses such as my own which one would presume should be benefitting most from it - but we don't. Instead, our livelihoods are deliberately being sabotaged and undermined by the way in which the visitor centre services are presented. This includes FACTS like following:

- a) the visitor centre staff do not present impartial info on Oxford tours available. Instead, they simply market and sell their own preferred so-called 'Oxford official walking tour'.
- b) the centre sign, its counter, its windows all present only the official tour, except for one advert for the independent ghost tour (which they are happy to market as it doesn't conflict with the timing of selling their own preferred tour)
- c) The website has over 200 pages marketing only the official tour and in most brochures and in group travel leads, they nearly always only mention the official tour. This despite fact that the official tour is not a paid up partner tour. Meanwhile, businesses like mine have to pay from a minimum fee of £390 upwards pa and only get their info published on part of one page. That's 0.5% of available page views!
- d) The supposedly independent guild of blue badge guides will never respond to, nor will Visit Oxfordshire Ltd, to answer what is the status of the relationship between these two organisations and why they get such preferential status, including having special payments made on their behalf by Visit Oxfordshire Ltd to Visit England, which we don't get paid for us.

Yet all my previous attempts to get the council to review and intervene to ensure that circumstances make for a fairer marketplace have been ignored. This is not helping

struggling small traders like myself and it is misinforming the public too. Neither does it make sense to continue funding such a company when there are public cuts. Will the council take seriously the need to address these complaints?