

Statement from Alasdair de Voil, I Love Oxford Tours Director

1a) REQUEST FOR ATTENTION OF SCRUTINY TEAM:

I would like to ask that Oxford city council does an internal review to scrutinise the original and the ongoing circumstances of the arrangements and contractual agreement between the city council and county council with Experience Oxfordshire (formerly known as Visit Oxfordshire Ltd.) to provide the provision of tourist information services at Oxford visitor info centre and on its associated websites.

A edited copy of the contractual document for this partnership was released to me after a FOI (freedom of info) request but much of what may have been most useful info was hidden. The reason given for not disclosing fully, was supposed reasons of 'commercial confidentiality'. This included hiding the names of whoever actually signed the partnership into place. I think that at the very least, whoever signed this agreement, has no reason to hide their names and the public and unhappy local tour operators like myself, deserve to know who signed it, so that we know to whom we should be addressing our ongoing concerns about the circumstances of this partnership.

1b) I would like whoever signed this agreement or whoever is now liable for consequences of its agreement, to give a rational explanation of why I can find absolutely no mention in the contract whatsoever of how the councils or Experience Oxfordshire will endeavour to offer an impartial service to those businesses such as independent tour operators, who would be most affected by the new agreement.

1c) Can the council explain precisely what is the legal company/charity and accounting status of the organisation which declares income and tax paid to HMRC for services offered by Oxford visitor info centre. I ask, as according to public information, it appears that it is not Experience Oxfordshire but another named company or charity that records this income. If that is correct, please can the council explain what is the legal relationship between these companies.

1d) Concerning 1c), can the scrutiny committee advise if they are confident that none of the individuals named as shareholders or directors in either of above organisations are or were former council members i.e. are you confident there is no conflict of interest?

1e) Concerning 1c) income returns from sales of Oxford Visitor Info centre, will the council accept that due to frequent complaints by local tour operators that we believe that visitor info centre is biased to market its own so-called 'official Oxford walking tours', therefore the city council should review & make known info concerning how much income Oxford visitor info centre earned directly from selling 'official Oxford walking tours', whether as individual tickets or as private group tours. Note that Experience Oxfordshire claim that as they are a private company, they need not answer any FOI request.

1f) Does the city council recognise that according to documentation of the contractual agreement mentioned in 1a), ultimately it is my understanding that the

city council appears to be finally legally liable for any misconduct, conflicts of interest, fraud or any serious charges which an individual may choose to litigate over. Therefore is the city council willing to agree today to conduct a public report and an internal review into the circumstances of why local tour operators like myself are considering taking legal action (to ensure that Oxford visitor info centre and its websites & associated directors & stakeholders stop marketing their own conflict of interest so-called 'official tour')?

1g) REQUEST A PUBLIC INVESTIGATION TO REVIEW WHY MOST OXFORD TOUR OPERATORS ARE UNHAPPY WITH HOW VISITOR CENTRE IS RUN:

Over 9 million tourists are believed to visit Oxford area annually, so it is of utmost significance that those businesses most affected by the necessity for there to be an adequate, fair, professionally & ethically managed visitor information service should be consulted about how much confidence or lack of confidence, they have in the capacity of Experience Oxfordshire to represent their interests.

I request that as the city council claims in its brochures that it understands the need to support local employment generation & local businesses and the significance of tourism industry, it should therefore conduct a public review with local tour operators and guest house owners and hotels- either both existing partners, former partners or organisations which refuse to pay the visitor info centre for partnership status, to hear their concerns and to review why the visitor info centre is so unpopular.

Sincerely,

Alasdair de Voil,
Campaign for a Fair Marketplace and Director of ILoveOxford Tours