

Address to Council by Alasdair de Voil

Concerning abuse/conflict of interest: Visit Oxfordshire

Please note that I have been complaining for over 2 years about how Visit Oxfordshire Ltd., which runs Oxford visitor information centre on behalf of Oxford City & County Councils, sees fit to go out of their way to undermine and disadvantage local businesses like mine- the very tourism businesses which it is supposed to be introducing information about our services to the public. Essentially, Visit Oxfordshire does the opposite of its remit and when it comes to presenting information about guided tours of Oxford (the most relevant service it offers), it does little else than sell and market only one tour (its so-called 'Official Oxford walking tour') to the almost complete exclusion of every other tour. In other words, despite receiving public funding to provide a public service on behalf of Oxford City and County Council, it actually misuses its position to run a monopoly interest on selling its own tour. How it can even be appropriate for a supposedly impartial service provider to even run its own tour, is strange in itself and represents already a conflict of interest.

I can give many examples of how it abuses its position but the most obvious is if you visit their website, nearly every single page directs people to its official tour but you'd have to look very hard to find tours like mine listed there. The website has something like 5,000 % more advertising for the official tour than it does for any other tour- despite fact the that we pay them a minimum £390 annual partnership fee and the official tour pays absolutely no such fee to be advertised!

I have also already several times pointed out to the Highways department that every day, a sign is put outside Oxford Visitor Information Centre, which doesn't comply with highways guidelines as their guidelines state that a sign board may only be left outside a business unless 50% of the advertising on display is about the business it is located outside of. Yet the sign advertises now only the so-called 'Oxford Official Walking Tour', which is according to Oxford visitor info centre, an independently operated business from their own organisation's remit. Yet when people like MP Andrew Smith and the Local Government Ombudsman and the Oxford Times have asked questions about how can the visitor centre operate impartially (while being a publicly funded and supposedly impartial service), no one has been offered a reasonable explanation of why Visit Oxfordshire is advertising and selling only one Oxford walking tour to the almost complete exclusion of performing their remit to provide a public service about all tours available.

When everyone apart from the highways department asked what is the status of the relationship between the official tours and the visitor centre, each time they were advised that the Official Oxford tour is not the visitor centre's tour but that they simply see fit to sell (only it and no other Oxford tour). They always claimed the tour is in fact run by the blue badge guild of guides. However, when the highways department asked visitor centre about the sign outside the visitor centre (advertising only the official Oxford tour), they told them the tour is the visitor centre's own tour. In other words: 1) the visitor centre is running a monopoly interest if it is their own tour (as they claim to the Highways department) but 2) it is not their own tour, when anyone

else asks them why with a remit to be impartial, they only want to advertise and sell tickets for one tour

Truth be told, tour operators like myself, only really need signage in one location and only need our advertising to be found easily and without prejudice at one location and on the one most important website which nearly all visitors to Oxford will use. The periphery of other sites and advertising sources are very secondary in importance to our opportunity to attract customers. (in last 3 years)

However, sadly the visitor information centre is so far from being either impartial or functioning with a remit to benefit businesses like mine which pay it a significant partnership fee, this in spite of the fact that Visit Oxfordshire Ltd has received almost £1 million in the last 3 years from Oxford City and County Council, to deliver a publicly funded service. Instead, it continues to see fit to directly undermine local businesses like mine- which provide the services that it exists to promote information about to the public. I have been complaining about these circumstances for over 2 years to Oxford City Council because in effect, the Council is permitting a supplier to ruin our business opportunity and is doing all this with Council funding.

This is a serious matter as the public is not getting its money spent in the fair way it should be and local businesses are being damaged. Legal advisers recommended that as the City Council is the organisation finally responsible for this abuse of a public service, if we were to elect to sue for damages, it would be easier to sue the Council than Visit Oxfordshire Ltd. However, such a prospect is completely unnecessary anyway as the Council has a duty to ensure its services are being provided in an appropriate manner. Visit Oxfordshire Ltd. doesn't even provide its partners with a description of how they will provide a fair service- despite my asking for such a statement since the day I relented to pay them my annual £390 partnership fee. The value of sales which I have had as a result of my fee and partnership is nothing like a return on investment on the fee I paid them and I have heard so many other partnership members say the same thing that they find the service they get is appalling and not a R.O.I. We see this as being the case because it is so evidently clear that Visit Oxfordshire's agenda is to market and sell the Official Oxford tour wherever possible and only then offer an alternative if they can't do so.

As nearly all visitors gravitate towards the visitor centre and its website, funnily enough, what this means as a result is that nearly all the opportunity for customers goes to the visitor centre's monopoly Official Oxford tour. This is in spite of the fact that while we pay them a partnership fee, the blue badge guild of guides pays no partnership fee at all! That's because Visit Oxfordshire receives about 50% in commission from every individual ticket they sell for the official tour.

These completely unsatisfactory circumstances have been made known to Oxford City Council for over two years but absolutely no action has yet been taken to ensure a fair marketplace and to reprimand Visit Oxfordshire Ltd. which runs the visitor centre, nor has any action be taken to conduct a review of why the City Council permits such a gross conflict of interest to continue unchecked. The result is that it forces small businesses like mine to depend on claiming welfare benefits as we simply can't make a living when we are being exploited by the very organisation and

public service which has a duty to represent and promote our interests (instead of effectively stealing what could have been our customers).

Myself and other Oxford tour operators have lost patience with these circumstances and we suggest very strongly that the City and County Council take more responsibility for the damage caused to our businesses or we will have to review what alternative paths may have to be undertaken to see that we can make a viable living by having a fair marketplace. Surely the Council is supposed to be supporting small local businesses to thrive- especially ones which develop and promote Oxford's heritage and culture. Currently, the average £300,000 annual funding which the Council is paying Visit Oxfordshire Ltd, is being used to no better effect than to force tour operators like myself into losing money just trying to operate tours. We want to make a modest living but instead in my case, I am having to work several other jobs and depend ultimately on housing benefit and working tax credit, to be able to survive. Is this all that your Council has to offer entrepreneurs like me?

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