**Council 2 October 2017 Agenda Item 15 – petition**

**Statement by the Board Member for Community Safety, Councillor Hayes, in response to the petition.**

I would like to set the record straight on this matter.

The catalyst for this petition was misinformed newspaper reports which brought a lot of well-meaning but unjustified criticisms onto our staff and council. The reports were sourced from a series of ill-informed social media assertions and a press release rushed out by a member of this Council. This is deeply regrettable and I hope for a correction of the public record, an apology to officers, and recognition of the desirability of taking the search for political gain out of tackling Oxford’s serious problem of street homelessness.

Fire safety is the heart of this case. After receiving a complaint from the builders who were renovating a building in Cornmarket, officers issued Community Protection Notices on three piles of unattended bags blocking the fire exits. The builders had asked the owner of one pile to remove them. The owners left their belongings unattended during the day and returned at night.

This Council takes its fire safety responsibilities very seriously indeed and the builders involved had a right to feel safe from fire and to be able to rely on this authority to protect their safety.

Community Protection Notices were used to inform the owners when they returned that they needed to remove their bags from this location. No-one has received or ever will receive a Community Protection Notice for being homeless.

Importantly, these notices provide the Council with the ability to legally remove and store items for collection. The inclusion of information in notices on other eventual sanctions that could be applied by a Court, is standard practice for notices of this type issued by local authority notices. A Community Protection Notice is no different. The Council gave two days for the bags to be relocated which they were.

I want to take this opportunity to thank our council officers for their public service. Many officers come into the city centre long before their working day to talk with vulnerable people. Our officers know many of the homeless people in the city centre because they’ve established relationships with them. The goal for officers always is to link homeless and vulnerable people up with support services.

This media ‘storm’ is regrettable because it could have been avoided by the member concerned having taken the time to seek the appropriate information from officers instead of rushing to cast blame. It is also regrettable because of the damage that has been done to the relationship of trust with the people that this council aims to support and engage with key services.

It’s important to emphasise two things.

First, we need to remember who is to blame politically for the national homelessness tragedy playing out on the streets of our city. The public spending watchdog, the National Audit Office, has acknowledged in the last few days that the Government’s welfare reforms and spending cuts are likely to have increased homelessness. Austerity has forced people onto the streets and we should hold this Government to account.

Second, because of cuts in their Government grant , Oxfordshire County Council has been cutting the support it gives to local homelessness hostels. The City Council has been seeking to increase its support for homeless people who find themselves in very difficult situations. We should take pride in the work done by our staff and the groups with who they work.

Each year this Council spends £1.4m on homeless services, including day services, the provision of food, laundry and shower facilities, key outreach and resettlement services, mental health support, and a range of accommodation. This can include provision for young people, people with complex needs, those who are working, as well as emergency provision in winter.

I hope all councillors will take pride in their ongoing support for these services and the ‘Gold Standard’ in Housing and Homelessness Prevention which this council received from the National Practitioner Support Service in July 2017, which puts Oxford City Council into the top 3% of all local authorities in England.

This City Council also funds a range of services that provide support, including the Big Issue and education, training and employment services, as well as prevention for people at risk of homelessness who are fleeing violence, tenancy sustainment support, and welfare reform assistance.

Last year we helped win £790,000 of government funding to support vulnerable single homeless adults in Oxfordshire, we have contributed £15m to purchasing properties to house homeless Oxford families, and we have retained our 7,800 council houses to provide affordable rents.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to recent Executive Board reports passed last week regarding further housing options for street homeless.

This council takes the national homelessness tragedy playing out on the streets of our city very seriously; we know the circumstances of people on the streets, the risks they face and their support needs, because we have built relationships with them.

If you opt to be a public sector worker focused on supporting the vulnerable, you don’t get out of bed every day to fine homeless people sums of money they can’t afford. You get out of bed to do your very best and you work flat out doing it. That happens to be what our officers do and I want to commend them for doing so.