

To: Council

Date: 20 July 2020

Title of Report: Public addresses and questions that do not relate to matters for decision – as submitted by the speakers and with written responses from Cabinet Members

Introduction

1. Addresses made by members of the public to the Council, and questions put to the Cabinet members or Leader, registered by the deadline in the Constitution, are below. Any written responses available are also below.
2. The text reproduces that sent in the speakers and represents the views of the speakers. This is not to be taken as statements by or on behalf of the Council
3. This report will be republished after the Council meeting as part of the minutes pack. This will list the full text of speeches delivered as submitted, summaries of speeches delivered which differ significantly from those submitted, and any further responses.

Addresses and questions to be taken in Part 2 of the agenda.

1. Address by Colin Aldridge – Drug consumption rooms
2. Address by Peter Thompson, Director Oxford School of English – Expanded Retail Discount scheme
3. Address by Tanagra Jabu Nala-Hartley – Oxford Living Wage
4. Address by Hsin-Yung Yen – Motion on Twinning with Taiwanese city
5. Address by David Madden – concern at the accumulating impact of development.

1. Address by Colin Aldridge – Drug consumption rooms

I am here today to ask you to consider the concept of Drug consumption rooms (DCR).

Amid a wartime panic, the government imposed the Defence of The Realm Act (DORA) which banned the sale of cocaine, opium and cannabis without prescription to troops. Before this time these drugs were readily available and in the 1800s, Laudanum could be readily available without prescription, its use was famously advocated by Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth and Keats. Queen Victoria was said to have used opium and Britain fought twice with China for control of opium trade during the Opium Wars – the British Empire was in fact the biggest drug dealer around during this time [see [reference](#)]

I do not want you to consider legalising drugs in their entirety but a small change to the present law to allow Drug Consumption Rooms. Drug consumption rooms have the ability to reach and maintain contact with high-risk drug users who are not ready or willing to stop using drugs. The [evidence base](#) contradicts concerns that such facilities encourage drug use, delay treatment entry, or aggravate problems arising from local drug markets – finding instead that both the users and the community stand to benefit.

As frontline, low-threshold services, drug consumption rooms are often among the first to gain insights into new drug use patterns and thus they also have a role to play in the early identification of new and emerging trends among the high-risk populations using their services. The emergence of new forms of injectable stimulants, including new psychoactive substances, have resulted in potentially increased risks for drug users, and this is part of the context for the political discussion in some European countries about the introduction of drug consumption rooms

This clear and concise presentation of the evidence suggests that the benefits of drug consumption rooms “may include improvements in safe, hygienic drug use, especially among regular clients, increased access to health and social services, and reduced public drug use and associated nuisance”.

Previous Home Secretaries, when responding to the advice of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, have all reiterated that the majority of public opinion is against reforming the current stance on prohibition. However, [a poll commissioned on the 10/07/2010](#) by the Liberal Democrats found that when the definitions of three regulatory options were given to members of the public instead of simply asking "Do you think drugs should be legalised?" the majority in fact supported new regulatory control.

As of April 2018, there were 90 Drug Consumption Rooms in Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Switzerland.

Pragmatic solutions have led to rewarding results in Portugal; after decriminalising possession and consumption of drugs in 2001, the country has since seen drug related deaths reduced to three per million [see [reference](#)]

There were 3,756 deaths relating to drug poisoning in England and Wales in 2017, a rate of 66.1 deaths per 1 million population, and similar to levels seen in 2016. [see [reference](#)]

The public recognise DCR's are not the complete answer to drug use but a step in the right direction.

I would urge you to talk to the residents you represent, listen to what they say and make the decision to talk with all the MP's to talk to their colleagues in Parliament. DCR's will happen it just depends when.

Verbal Response from the Cabinet Member for a Safer Healthy Oxford, Councillor Upton

Thank you very much indeed for coming to us with this sensible and pragmatic balanced address on the idea of drug consumption rooms.

I read the briefing that you mentioned in it from the European Union's drug misuse monitoring centre which was really interesting. As you've mentioned it outlines evidence that contradicts many of the views that people have about introducing them and outlines the benefits, some of which I had not even thought of before. Alongside the obvious ones of fewer overdose deaths and not sharing dirty needles, there are benefits in getting vulnerable people somewhere where they might be much more likely to access health and social services, and reducing the awful problem of discarded needles that our street ambassadors are having to deal with every day.

Speaking as a neuroscientist, I know something about the effects that addictive drugs can have on brain function. Once control of dopamine release at synapses involved in reward circuits of the brain has become dysregulated it is very hard to fix.

Drug addicts need help and I can see that drug consumption rooms are a way of keeping them safe and increasing the likelihood of them getting help. It is beyond the remit of the city council to commission a drug consumption room: however the County Council has the responsibility for public health. I sit on the Health and Well-Being Board for Oxfordshire (all six councils have a representative) and I will raise it there, because I think this is something we really should look at.

Thank you very much for bringing this evidence to our attention.

2. Address by Peter Thompson, Director Oxford School of English – Expanded Retail Discount scheme

As you know, Oxford City Council has decided that English language schools do not meet the eligibility criteria for this Scheme.

The guidance issued by the government sets out broad categories of those businesses that are eligible, and lists examples; however, the guidance also states that this list 'is not intended to be exhaustive... Authorities should determine for themselves whether properties are broadly similar in nature and, if so, to consider them eligible for the relief.'

In contrast to Oxford City Council, at least 17 other local authorities have interpreted the guidance to conclude that English language schools do indeed meet the criteria, and have therefore granted the relief to language schools in their area.

These 17 authorities include Brighton City Council which sought specific advice directly from the government. As a result, in late May the Council announced that they would indeed include their own language schools in the rates relief scheme. The Council explained that they had defined a test of eligibility, saying that 'This test will evidence to government that we have fully considered their requirements before making an award'.

Oxford City Council has said that it considers English language schools 'to be educational and that the tourism element is a benefit derived from their primary function'. With respect, the Council is entirely wrong. It must be evident to all Oxford residents that the prime reason for the majority of students attending courses at English language schools is not to study English, but to engage in a form of tourism. At Easter and in the summer this is an inescapable fact of our city centre, as groups of these teenage tourists throng the streets and public spaces.

These young people are here to experience British life, to participate in British customs, and to live with British people. Most are here for just two or three weeks, but it can be as little as five days. They are, very evidently, tourists.

Oxford School of English provides an income to some 70 staff and 250 host families, and annually contributes almost £3m to the local economy. The annual value to the British economy of our sector as a whole is £1.4bn.

Since March our income has been zero, and is unlikely to recover to any degree until Easter next year. We need help to reach that point. Without that help, we and other schools are in imminent danger of failure.

On behalf of our sector's 200 Oxford staff, and of the thousand or so host families whose income is threatened, and of the many thousands of residents who benefit in other ways, I urge Councillors to look again at this scheme and to follow the lead of your colleagues in Brighton, and to grant us the rates relief we so desperately need.

**Verbal response from the Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management,
Councillor Turner**

Thanks very much for sharing these points. I very much appreciate what you say and feel for everyone working in the sector and as a council we want to do what we can to help. These issues have been raised with me number of times and I've discussed them at length with officers to see if we have any discretion we can apply here so that such relief can be granted. Officers have been clear with me that there isn't any such discretion and that granting reliefs in this way wouldn't be in line with the guidance.

The Leader wrote to the relevant government minister asking for a change in and clarification of the rules and unfortunately we haven't had a reply to that letter. We put that case to ministers because there is absolutely no rationale for helping one sector of the economy which is gravely affected by the implosion of people coming to this country for serious purposes (which includes language school students) but not another. The logic of government policy in granting the reliefs should surely point to this sector being included.

I'm very happy on the basis of tonight's address to encourage officers to look at the decisions made by Brighton City Council, and if officers are satisfied that that's legally robust I'm sure we'd look to follow that route. But I have to caution it's been looked at carefully and so far officers' opinion is that the government's regulations don't allow those payments to be made. Be assured that we will do what we can, whether it is by lobbying national government for a change or by making a change locally if we can.

3. Address by Tanagra Jabu Nala-Hartley – Oxford Living Wage

As chair of the Oxford Living Wage Campaign, I would like to thank the continued support we have from the Oxford City Council. We would like the council to continue to support the campaign especially as we face economic challenges from Covid-19.

Oxford communities must continue to be supported in their plight. The gig economy has devastated workers through precarious contracts which have eroded decent wages.

We must continue in our efforts to build solidarities and strengthen our resolve especially as the Covid-19 crisis is not over.

As Chair of the campaign I would like to place on record our thanks to Oxford City Council for its work on the Oxford Living Wage, and to use this opportunity to invite the Council to reaffirm its commitment to paying and promoting the Oxford Living Wage.

I would also like to take this opportunity to ask all Councillors present to take up the cause of the Oxford Living Wage, to join the campaign, and argue for the Living Wage in their wards.

Verbal response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Brown

Thank you for your statement. I would certainly be very happy to make it absolutely clear that the Council remains firmly behind the idea of an Oxford Living Wage for our own employees and also, importantly, for other employees across the city. I think it is an important point: to make it clear that it is really important that workers in our city are paid a decent rate of pay because if our economy locally is going to recover then people need to have some disposable income to invest in it. That is a crucial virtuous circle: paying people properly means that they have money to invest in other local businesses and that is the argument that the city council continues to make.

This relates in many ways to the report I am bringing later on about the work on that we do with the Local Economic Partnership. I've worked very hard as a director of that organisation to get the idea of an inclusive economy across to that partnership and to the Oxfordshire Growth Board. I'm pleased to say that the work that we have done with both of those organisations (to get the idea of an inclusive economy foremost in people's minds) is now very much part of their thinking and is being written into the work that they do. It is very important that we make sure that out of this pandemic we try and tackle some of the inequalities in our city and do not let them become further reinforced.

Thank you very much for raising the issue: it definitely remains one of our priorities to make sure that as many organisations as possible across our city are paying the Oxford Living Wage.

4. Address by Hsin-Yung Yen – Motion on Twinning with Taiwanese city

My name is Hsin-Yung Yen, the founder of a pharmaceutical company based in Oxford. I was born in Taiwan and moved to the UK as a postdoctoral researcher in Oxford University in 2014. It has been a wonderful opportunity for me to work in this world's top University. What I have learn from this greatest environment is its diversity with different culture and perspectives. I have been inspired by interacting with colleagues from different countries and this has in turn driven my research success and led to the formation of our company with £40 million investment. I am very delighted to devote myself, especially with all the training and experience I received from Taiwan, to the growth of high-end industry in the UK. I truly believe in the value of what we call "Taiwanese experiences" and how much it could bring to the UK policy and economy. There have been many examples demonstrating our contributions in human rights, technology, global health, etc. What I can foresee from this motion is to bring more Taiwanese talents to Oxford, to help drive growth of the city and to enhance the understanding of our culture. The decision to twin Oxford with a city in Taiwan will create a channel with bilateral benefits between Taiwanese and British people, and therefore I fully support it.

Verbal response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Brown

Thank you very much for your address. Our council is really proud of its international links, and the large number of citizens from overseas that we have in our city is something that we've always really welcomed. We are always looking at different ways of cementing those friendships with cities overseas and indeed populations within our own city. We will be debating a motion on twinning links later on the agenda.

One of the things that I would emphasise is the importance of friendship links leading ultimately to a formal twinning link. Certainly our most successful twinning links have been based on long-standing friendship links that have built up over time. The council has limited resources when it comes to actually supporting formal twinning arrangements, and I think it important that people understand that much of the work of maintaining and expanding friendship links is done by citizens within both cities.

This proposal is very much worth exploring and we'd be happy to support it. We will come on to debate it more fully later in the meeting. Thank you very much for coming to address us today

5. Address by David Madden – concern at the accumulating impact of development.

Thank you for agreeing that I can address your meeting today.

My reason for requesting to speak is the growing level of concern at the accumulating impact of developments on the Conservation Area, the environment and the community: now and in the future.

The North Oxford Victorian Suburb Conservation Area is a very important part of the history and heritage of Oxford. It was preserved for a purpose. When it's gone, it's gone. There is no way back. You the Council are the current custodians, or guardians, of the Conservation Area. Please honour that trust. To allow the piecemeal destruction of the Area would be an abuse of authority and process.

Much the same applies to the environment. You have declared a Climate Emergency. So far that is merely words. It needs action to mean something. Again, you are the custodians. We long ago reached the stage when we should stop destruction. We need sustainability and regeneration. We look to you to take a lead. At present, the wide range of climate-related issues is not being addressed.

The community is awaiting signs that you listen and engage; respond to reasoned concerns and criticisms; and act as our champion. And, above all, please do not fall into avoidable mistakes and setting bad precedents. Developers everywhere are looking for signs of weakness and exploitable opportunities.

A number of us have tried to engage with Council officers and Councillors on development issues: but with the exception of some specific Councillors, have not felt listened to.

Oxford is changing. It has a huge pipeline of development projects ahead. These need to be considered holistically and strategically.

Those points may be rather general in tone, but they are important. I have four more detailed suggestions for the meeting today:

- Planning Committees have their role, but that does not absolve the Council of responsibilities or the right of overview and oversight. Might senior Councillors involve themselves more in the work of the Committees, a) to check that nothing is amiss, and b) to sniff out the potential for justified objections?
- There is a widespread view that Planning Officers can become, because of their close long-term association with projects, the mouthpieces of developers. This is bad for local democracy. And the close relationship means that developers can exert pressure. The planners need to maintain independent scrutiny, and be prepared to listen to objections as well: so that they can advise Councillors wisely. Could they balance their apportionment of time and engage with the community as planning goes forward?
- More specifically, an element of good design included in planning rules is acceptability to the local community. At present there is (occasional) engagement with the residents only through the developers, and on their terms. This is surely not acceptable. Is it not possible to build consultation with the community on questions of design directly into the planning process?
- Often there will be competing views eg on difficult and loaded (but absolutely essential) issues like biodiversity. These have to be resolved, not just left hanging in the air. There can quite easily be independent resolution. Could officers engage more with known experts, and not just the developers?

And one final, over-arching point; public confidence in processes of planning and development have to be preserved. This is essential. They affect the lives, health and livelihoods of everyone.

Verbal response from the Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery, Councillor Hollingsworth

I will pick up on a number of the points and then try to provide a more detailed written response.

The first point I wanted to make relates to the second of the four specific suggestions. It's an elegantly worded suggestion, but one that I find quite worrying. I was also asked by Councillor Gant to raise this as he feels very much the same as me.

In effect it is using the opportunity of this public petition to suggest, rather than accuse, the council's planning officers of being biased in favour of developers. In my long experience on this council, and indeed talking to planning officers in other councils, this is almost never true of planning officers and is **certainly not true** of the planning officers of this council. It is an unfortunate slur on their professionalism and one that I regret is made in this way.

More broadly I think what the petition suggests is the struggle that many of us have with the confines of the planning system has laid down in law.

When I do planning training for other councils, one of the first things that one needs to get across to new councillors is that the planning system is essentially like a quasi-judicial process and its starting point is that development should go ahead unless there is a specific reason why it shouldn't. That presumption in favour of development is something that is not widely understood, and nor should it be. It is laid down in the national planning policy framework - and indeed has been laid down in all planning law since 1947 - but the majority of the population do not spend their time engaging with the detail of planning law.

So there is probably a communications issue here, and it is for this council and others to help explain the issues. It is explained at all planning meetings, and those of us who have sat on planning meetings, either now or in the past, will be aware that it is a difficult message to convey because it's one that flies against the expectations that that many people have.

Addressing some of those other concerns:

On the suggestion that senior councillors or the Leader of the Council should interfere with the planning committees: that would leave the council wide open to challenge and judicial review as it would in effect be political interference in the working of the planning committee and entirely inappropriate. That's the consequence of the planning system: councillors must leave their political beliefs behind them when they enter a planning committee

On the issue of consultation, the council does its best to consult with the community, but the rules under which this takes place are those laid down by the government which do not require developers to go beyond the legal minimum. Good developers go beyond the minimum; less good developers do not.

Councillor Gant asked to make a statement as he had been named in the response.

I did indeed correspond with Councillor Hollingsworth this afternoon. I do want to make it clear that I began my message saying how much I admire and value the huge energy and commitment of people like our speaker this afternoon in engaging with the planning process and it's very clear certainly in my part of Oxford the huge benefits that that brings not least in the development of the Local Plan which covers both my ward and the ward which contains the recent planning application that he is thinking of.

The speaker is of course perfectly entitled to expect that councillors on planning committees will read all submissions and I hope that they do so.

But finally I want to make it clear that I was specifically raising the speaker's statement that '*planning officers can become the mouthpiece of developers*'. There's a long-standing and very valuable convention that officers are not able to answer criticism of that kind and that Councillors should essentially defend them; and that was the point I wanted to make. My thanks to Cllr Hollingsworth for his statements in their defence.