

To: Council

Date: 4 October 2021

Title of Report: Public addresses and questions that do not relate to matters for decision

This sets out speeches and questions as submitted by the speakers, with written responses from Cabinet Members and summaries of verbal responses from Cabinet Members at the meeting.

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 was republished after the Council meeting as part of the minutes pack. This lists the full text of speeches delivered as submitted, summaries of speeches delivered which differ significantly from those submitted, and any further responses.
4. The views expressed by members of the public are their own and do not reflect, and are not necessarily endorsed as, the views of the Council.

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

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Questions from the Oxford Hindu Temple & Community Centre Project (OHTCCP)

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

1. Address by Dr Gian Guptal of the Oxford Hindu Temple & Community Centre Project (OHTCCP)

Mr Chairman, esteemed Councillors, I am here today to appeal to you **to help us set-up a Hindu Cultural & Spiritual Centre for the large number of Hindus both in the City and the County.**

The Oxford Hindu Temple & Community Centre Project registered as a Charitable Organisation in 2009 to meet the need of the growing (more than 3000 declaring themselves in the 2011 Census) Hindus for a Central place of their own where they could gather to celebrate their Culture and do communal worship. Since 2011 the number is close to 10,000 - adding in those in the County

I am here today to make the same appeal being made for 13 years now; the appeal for this council, one of the largest landlords in Oxford City, to sell us one of your properties. I say "your properties" even though practically these properties belong to the people of Oxford because we, the Hindus of Oxford do not feel we are part and parcel of this historic city as we have been knocking on your door for 13 years.

For 13 years councillors have heard our appeals, attended our events and been honoured for their presence. You have expressed your support for us & expressed your commitment to helping us have a community & faith space for Hindus. Yet more than a decade later here I am, standing here asking for your help. With respect, I submit that what we have been given is a lot of hot air. We have had enough of that. Is it within your capacity to really help us? The time you fully embrace the Hindus of this city will be the time you find us worthy and valuable enough to facilitate us having a proper place in this city.

Working in the Medical field, the IT field and Academia the Hindu community contributes immensely to the life of Oxford. We have been significant contributors to many other events organised by the Council itself or other organisations. These volunteers have had to do a huge amount of preparation in their own homes so just imagine how much more we could contribute if we had a Central Place of our own.

This brings me to the question of lack of help from this Council – which owns **over 800** properties in this city. Is it too much to ask **that just one** of the unused or underused could be allocated to us? You have responded to the suggestion that we cannot buy a residential property and convert it to a Hindu Temple and Community Centre because it reduces the housing stock. We get that there is a housing shortage but will granting permission for **ONE** building to be converted for a temple for the Oxford residents seriously dent your housing target? I would like to point out that Oxford is full of such centres of worship within housing areas; setting up one more would hardly dent the Council Housing Target. I submit to you that it is firmly within your power to help the thousands of Hindus, many of whom have voted for you to run this city.

We understand your legal obligation to ensure best value for any property you sell. But best value should not always be monetary value. What about community value? Many of you have attended our events and **despite our homeless situation**, seen the value we add to Oxford. Imagine the tremendous community value we can bring with premises of our own.

We have identified derelict and unusable properties which have fallen into a state of disrepair eg. Blackbird Leys Pavilion & the changing rooms at Marsh Lane. We have offered to buy one of those buildings from you, pay over £150K to bring it into use as a

community & spiritual centre. We have negotiated with you for over two years with nothing to show for those talks. We have been pushed around with empty promises and are nowhere further than where we started. Are you serious about helping us? If you are -WHEN?

If the response to this speech is **“Yes, we are committed to helping you”**, please let it be meaningful and deliverable this time as WE have heard it in many different forms over the last decade. I can assure you that we **will** establish Oxfordshire’s first Hindu Cultural and Spiritual Centre; we hope it will be in this historic City attracting many visitors.

So, I urge you to make it a part of your Plans or we **will set up** one **elsewhere** in the County.

Written Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

Thank you for your passionate address today at Council. We very much want to put on record our recognition of the excellent work and contribution to our City by the Oxford Hindu Community. I certainly empathise with you in relation to the ongoing search for a suitable property and the time it is taking to find a suitable one. We would of course very much like to see this within the City if that is at all possible. Unfortunately the property situation within the City is challenging.

The majority of the City Council’s non-housing properties are either operational and in current use, or are part of our commercial investment portfolio e.g. retail and offices, which deliver rental income to help us support core services. However, we have undertaken a more general review of community provision with the area to see if any properties could be marketed for reuse. While this exercise was to consider potential opportunities for wider community uses, as you know, we have kept an open dialogue with you during this process.

This review has this resulted in the identification of the two properties you mention above; the pavilion at Blackbird Leys and the changing rooms at Marsh Lane. The former is partly in use by another community group and the vacant part is in extremely poor condition. The Council concluded that this building could not offer a sensible and viable option for us to market at this time. We carried out a survey of the redundant changing rooms at Marsh Lane and agreed that this building could be considered for further due diligence and exploration. To do this the Council has to consider its statutory obligations to all members of the community and therefore we would need to market any future opportunity in a fair and transparent manner. However we agree that it might be a potential home for the Hindu Community. We are considering the next steps needed to be able to openly market the building in its current condition including the Council resource necessary to be able to take this forward.

Summary of Verbal Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

Cllr Aziz informed Council she had received the Oxford Hindu Temple & Community Centre Project’s petition. She reiterated that the Council would continue to work with the group to find a suitable place, acknowledging the length of time this was taking, and thanked OHTCCP for their willingness to work with other groups. She thanked Dr Gopal and OHTCCP for speaking to the meeting.

Questions from the Oxford Hindu Temple & Community Centre Project (OHTCCP)

2. Question from Mrs Kanta Gopal (OHTCCP)

Mrs Gopal outlined the ethos and contributions of the OHTCCP in the community.

She outlined the group's "frustration about council owned, unused building that would suit our charity to make an even bigger contribution, than we already do, to the diverse community of Oxfordshire & the difficulty we have had to date making progress getting an answer from the Council."

She asked: In discussions with the Council officers, Community Councillors & Leaders, it has been positively suggested that the Blackbird Leys Pavilion and the Changing Rooms at Marsh Lane, Court Place Farm, is a possibility for the Council to HELP US ESTABLISH A Hindu Centre AT ONE OF THESE SITES. These discussions have gone on for around two years without any conclusion!

When will the Council come to a decision on one of these properties?

Written Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

We are mindful that there is demand for community space, not only from the Hindu Community, but also other groups. Therefore, we did explore how we might bring the two sites mentioned back into community use given there is a demand for community space in this part of Oxford. This would be on the basis of marketing the properties to lease in their current condition with subsequent development/refurbishment to be undertaken by the future leaseholder. The Council carried out a condition survey of both earlier this year. We have also carried out a desktop review of other options for realising additional community space within the city but without success. The surveys showed that the bowls pavilion is in too poor a state to present a viable option for community groups at this time.

We are aware that the Hindu Community is keen on this latter option but it is important to note the Council would need to market the site in a fair and transparent manner, to give other community groups the same opportunity. The impact of the pandemic over the last 18 months has meant that the Council had to refocus its resources to support those most vulnerable within the City. It also meant that we had to pause our capital programme delivery which has slowed this process down and resources are still very tight. This workstream is now currently being reviewed along with any necessary resources. Any marketing process that does come forward as a result of this will need to be open and fair to all, but we would certainly encourage the Hindu Community to engage with this.

Summary of Verbal Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

Cllr Aziz thanked Mrs Gopal and said that officers would contact the group. She was mindful that many community groups were in need of space. Should the sites mentioned be sold, these would need to be marketed openly and transparently to give all groups an opportunity to bid. The Council was committed to finding a resolution for OHTCCP, while acknowledging the many challenges faced.

3. Question from Mr Mukesh Shori, OHTCCP

If OHTCCP were to find and buy an appropriate residential property, will the City Council approve change of use for the Hindu Temple and Community Centre? After all there are many places of worship within residential areas already in Oxford.

Written Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

Such a proposal would need planning permission. Any application would need to demonstrate how it accords with the Oxford Local Plan 2036. The policies within the plan provide guidance on where we would normally wish to see community facilities such as this located. We would normally resist development proposals that result in the loss of residential accommodation given the very severe housing shortage in the city, and any application would need to be judged on its merits within local plan policies, with due consideration of issues such as transport, parking etc.

Summary of Verbal Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

Cllr Aziz referred to her written response and her previous points.

4. Question from Ms Ingrid Widdows, OHTCCP

Ms Widdows outlined OHTCCP's vision for their community and worship centre. She noted that the Government Community Ownership Fund may provide funding should a successful bid for a suitable community asset be submitted by the deadline.

Her question: By tacitly refusing to sell OHTCCP a property for 13 years, does the Council feel that it has treated the Hindus of this city fairly and equally over the years, given that other major faiths all have a place of worship in Oxford?

Written Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

We believe that we have treated the Hindu Community fairly and equally and will continue to do so. The different faith groups in Oxford have pursued various routes in relation to establishing places of worship with some choosing to pursue private property options, including repurposing other places of worship, some renting space in community centres and schools, and some have used Property Agents who are able to advise on wider opportunities in the private sector market within the City.

Summary of Verbal Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

Cllr Aziz said she could discuss the funding option with the group. She acknowledged the length of time OHTCCP had been looking for a space, and their need for a permanent location. She thanked them for their contribution to the city and community and thanked them for speaking.

5. Question from John Marjot, representing the Friends of Lye Valley: Warren Crescent Development: 13/01555/CT3

Three planning conditions concern the trees along the top of the slope being retained without damage (especially the Root Protection Areas). The tree roots are important in stabilising the bank, but excavating the soakaway right up to and under the trees will damage their roots. The trees have to be severely permanently coppiced to minimise the leaves dropping into and clogging the soakaway, since dead leaves would prevent the desired infiltration of water to the SSSI Lye Valley fen. The combination of root damage and crown damage could easily kill the trees, another factor causing likely instability and potential collapse of the bank. The attached SDS Consulting SuDs design shows the proximity of the trees (the little grey rings) to the soakaway. The tree leaf canopy, the wavy line leaning over the swale shows where the leaves will drop. The adjacent red line shows the precipitous 12 m drop into the Valley. **The attached document shows the site layout.**

The Planning conditions for the trees are in direct conflict with the construction and function of the soakaway as designed.

Does Councillor Hollingsworth agree that only a redesign and relocation of the soakaway will address these issues?

Written Response from the Cabinet Member, Councillor Hollingsworth, read out at the meeting

The contractor and Oxford City Housing Limited have carried out a significant level of site survey work and are satisfied that due diligence has been applied. The works will be undertaken by competent professionals, in partnership with the relevant statutory bodies. The contractor has discharged the planning conditions related to the future maintenance of the site, in conjunction with Oxford City Council.

With regard to excavations at the tree line by the swale, the contractor has confirmed that the construction methodology would avoid any impact on existing tree roots. The main excavation is centrally within the swale. The functionality of the swale is linked to the SuDS maintenance and management plan which advises on the requirement of removal of litter and debris.

6. Address by Craig Holmes, on behalf of residents of Warren Crescent.

My name is Craig Holmes and I am speaking on behalf of residents of Warren Crescent and the surrounding neighbourhoods.

As councillors are aware, there are plans for a housing development on the meadow adjacent to Warren Crescent. Numerous objections to this development have been made in the past, concerned both with the detrimental impact on the Lye Valley SSSI and the diversion of an established footpath. We continue to share these objections. Today, however, we are voicing our concerns about the impact this loss of green space will have on the local community directly.

The meadow is the only meaningful green space that still exists on the Girdlestone Road estate. It is a space where children and families are able to play, walk dogs and spend time outside. During the past 18 months of the pandemic, having a local space for doing so has become especially important. This is particularly true for the residents of the flats on the estate who do not have access to private gardens, meaning the development will take away the one remaining public outdoor space within a short walking distance. This is not easily replaced with alternative spaces in the nearby area – those involve longer walks, crossing multiple busy roads, or using space intended for, and already used by, another local community.

The background report on Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity for the development of the Local Plan 2040 states the following objective: “To provide adequate green infrastructure, leisure and recreation opportunities and make these readily accessible for all”. It also notes that “Paragraph 97 [of the National Planning Policy Framework] states that “Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless:

- a) an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
- b) the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or
- c) the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.”

We are unable to find any evidence of a rigorous assessment which would show the meadow is surplus to requirements. Speaking personally as residents of the street since 2013, we have never been directly consulted on our views or usage of the meadow, and we have been unable to find anyone else who has had a different experience. Instead, communication about the development has been piecemeal. For example, two years ago foundations were pre-emptively dug for the first building. We received letters to notify of this after the work had started. This area of the meadow has remained fenced off since then. Our view is that this space is very much not surplus to requirements, is well used, and would represent a significant loss to the local community. There is no proposal to find an alternative space to replace that which will be lost.

We are sure that councillors would agree that the principles set out above are not simply theoretical, but should inform decisions when it is actually time to apply them.

Therefore, we ask whether councillors agree that the Warren Crescent Meadow is not surplus to requirements, that the proposed development represents a significant, irreplaceable loss to the community and that consequently this development should not be going ahead.

Written Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Hollingsworth, read out at the meeting

This site was allocated for development in the Sites and Housing Plan adopted by this Council in 2013 as part of its Local Plan. The allocation formed part of the legally required 5 year housing land supply at the time, and while it involved the redevelopment of an area of green space, the allocation came about following a rigorous consultation process over several years, culminating in a formal examination in public. The site having been allocated for development, a planning application was submitted in 2013, and approved in 2016. A number of objections were made at the time which mirror those in the address; all of these were carefully considered in the report to the planning committee, and thus taken into account by the members of that committee when they voted to approve the application.

The allocation was consulted upon as part of the Sites and Housing Plan examination, and public consultation was undertaken throughout the determination of the application from the initial submission in 2013 and again during the determination process whenever variations were made to the plans, most recently in 2020.

The site was properly allocated for development – after consultation – and planning permission granted for that development – after further rounds of consultation. Both the allocation and the permission took into account all the concerns raised. Work had commenced on site, thus implementing the planning permission. These ten new council homes will make a small but important contribution to meeting the huge need for genuinely affordable housing for local families in Oxford.

7. Address from Ferishta Bakhtari-Boodoo, in support of Motion 15d (Afghanistan and refugees)

Dear Council leaders,

I am the child of Afghan refugees, who fled the Soviet Invasion. My parents were granted asylum in Germany and were able to safely travel to Europe without fear.

Growing up in a country, where I was safe from bombs and mines has enabled me to go to school and university, to build friendships, to work and to live a relatively happy and safe life.

Decades forward Afghans and their children are again fleeing from their home country, not knowing where they would find a new home. Many were not able to travel safe and without fear.

Trauma and stigmatisation is already part of their life since they left Afghanistan. You council leaders are now in a unique situation, where you can directly make a choice. To help the Afghan nationals here in the UK to heal from their past and start a new life here and to live in dignity. It is up to you to make a choice today for them.

I'm addressing you, our respected council leaders, today with the following plea:

Please ask the home secretary to withdraw the Borders Bill, grant safe permanent Refugee Status to all Afghan nationals who are in the UK and to release those detained, create safe pathways for undocumented Afghans to obtain refugee status and facilitate family reunions including from third countries.

Please ask the Local Government Association to establish a Sanctuary Taskforce. A fully resourced, just, and locally led emergency and long-term resettlement programme based on the principles of welcome, dignity, and justice is the only solution to the ongoing crisis.

I am also asking you to re-establish, Asylum Seeker and Vulnerable Migrant Coordination Group in joint leadership with the county and District Councils along the previously agreed principles of sanctuary.

Summary of Verbal Response from the Cabinet Member Councillor Aziz

Cllr Aziz thanked the speaker and in summary said:

She was sure everyone present felt heartbroken about the ongoing tragedy in Afghanistan and did not underestimate the horrors there, nor the trauma of the speaker's own flight from Afghanistan.

What we should be hoping and working for is for future generations to have a better life where young people can go to school and all can be safe. That's not happening and that's outrageous. The address talks about justice and compassion: it's devastating for us to see that these are not two ideals that we are familiar with the Home Office showing in relation to refugees.

We here in this council show full solidarity with Oxford's Afghan communities and indeed other refugees who have fled for their lives to come to our city and have contributed so much. Oxford is a city of sanctuary, we believe that everyone has the right to heal, and you can't heal if you don't have security; if you do not have a home.

The Council has no control over some issues as these are central government matters, but if it has then I know from members here that justice and compassion definitely would be the heart of that.

The United Nations High Commission works in conjunction with the Home Office to design and facilitate resettlement programs across the UK which Oxford City has

already committed to. In addition, communities themselves can help as the Home Office welcomes participation in community sponsorship schemes. In the South East, Oxford along with other councils are participating in regional migration partnerships.

What we do have in this country is not good enough: refugees are being criminalized and demonized daily and this has been going on for too long. We are here to work with the county and with national government to make the change that is required. Thank you for being here: it is really important because we need to hear directly from Afghans and particularly Afghan women so you have our full support and the council is committed to working with the new arrivals and to try and ensure that people have the security that they need and so they can build their lives.