

To: Council

Date: 29 November 2021

Report of: Head of Law and Governance

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

Introduction

1. Addresses made by members of the public to the Council that do not relate to matters for decision at this meeting, are below. Any available written responses provided by Cabinet Members are also included.
2. The text reproduces that sent in by the speakers and represents the views of the speakers. Their addresses are 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 to be taken in Part 2 of the agenda

1. Address by Hannah Massie – Motion 23a: Becoming a trans inclusive Council
2. Address by insert Bethia Thomas – Motion 23d: speaking against the reopening of Oxford Greyhound Stadium
3. Address by Kaddy Beck – The Save Bertie Park Campaign

Address not taken because the speaker did not attend the meeting

4. Address by Safieh Kabir on behalf of ACORN – prefabricated housing

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

1. Address by Hannah Massie – Motion 23a: Becoming a trans inclusive Council

Ladies, Gentlemen and Enbees

In 2016 some far right evangelical Christian groups declared being transgender went against their ideological beliefs and started a campaign to, and I quote from their strategy document, remove the rights of transgender folks, their access to healthcare and their ability to serve in public office; To eradicate them from society.

Using the same tactics such groups have deployed over centuries, including in Germany during the 1930's-40's, they set about pushing propaganda and misinformation through receptive mainstream media that demonised transgender folks and their allies as dangerous activists whose existence, demands and rights posed a threat to and silenced women, children and ordinary folks. They set up and funded organisations that claimed to be working for the good of particular groups but whose real purpose has been to stir up anti transgender sentiment and to split and isolate transgender folks from their support and mainstream society. They have funded expensive legal cases to challenge trans rights, access to healthcare and support from public bodies. They have claimed being transgender is a dangerous false ideology.

Now, let me make it clear. Gender is biological. Gender is neurological and gender is genetically determined. Though you may not be aware of it, each and every one of you has a unique gender identity that tells you who you are and where you belong, hardwired into your brain by your biology, by your genes. This you are born with and it is not something you can change. And your gender identities, indeed all of our identities exist across a spectrum that we, as a society, choose to divide into two, just as we do the spectrum of sex characteristics. But that division is flawed: There is no only male or female, and more enlightened societies divide differently – many into three but some up to five.

Because for some of us the gender we are assigned at birth based on our sex characteristics does not match the gender biology has given us. We are transgender. This is not an ideology. It is what we are. Biologically. It is not something we choose, nor could or would ever choose. It is not something we can be coerced into being nor cured nor converted from being. It is an extraordinarily challenging condition, that leads to frighteningly high levels of mental illness, self-harm and suicidality, and is hugely difficult and time consuming to deal with.

But does that make us a demanding dangerous threat to society? No of course not. I have two degrees, have run my own business for many years, have children who think I'm awesome and have set up, run and been involved numerous community groups over the years, including the church. My trans friends, both male, female and non-binary are lawyers, doctors, scientists, airline pilots, counsellors, academics, nurses, builders, and so on. Ordinary people who want to be able to live ordinary lives, true to themselves, just as you do. And are my rights as a woman threatened by my rights as someone who is transgender? I can tell you the answer is, unequivocally, no. And I should know.

As a small diverse community, with enough to deal with as it is, we have struggled to counter this evil and harmful campaign. So, I come here to ask for your support, because we need support and help. And that support needs to come from this chamber and chambers like this everywhere. Please educate yourselves, and help us to challenge the claims being made against us and expose their falsehood, to call out the misinformation and those promoting it.

If you believe racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia is wrong, if you believe segregation and discrimination based skin colour, sex characteristics, disability and neuro diversity, or sexuality is wrong then I would hope you would support this motion, as there is no difference between these and transphobia, being gender critical and wanting segregation and discrimination based on biological gender. And if you think otherwise or believe the propaganda then I will leave with the words of Oliver Cromwell, 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, to think it possible you may be mistaken'. On behalf of all the trans folks in Oxford, thank you for your time and thank you for your support.

Verbal response to be provided by Cllr Upton, Cabinet Member for a Safer, Healthy Oxford

Thank you for your address. I believe that I speak for all of my fellow councillors when I say that we are moved by your powerful and eloquent comments. We don't underestimate the bravery it took for you to come here tonight and share your experiences. Your personal statement will definitely inform our debate today.

2. Address by insert Bethia Thomas – Motion 23d: speaking against the reopening of Oxford Greyhound Stadium

Thank you so much for letting me speak today. When I heard about the proposal to reopen the stadium I was rocked to my core; so then, when this opportunity came up with the motion proposed to council later this evening, I felt determined to come here and address you.

Obviously, I feel a little cheeky addressing you as I have not lived in the city for many years. When I did live here, I was not a dog owner, and having brought my dog Baz in to see you at your last meeting, I think I know why - it is probably not that easy to be a dog owner here in the city.

But being a dog lover is another thing.

I have always been told Britain is a nation of dog lovers, or, talking more generally, a nation of animal lovers. Many of us would abhor cruelty to animals in most forms but what we are talking about today is just that – cruelty.

My doggos are lovely, gentle, soppy creatures. They are both rehomed ex-racers, and while they are happy and healthy now, living the life of luxury on my sofa like your average cockapoo or labradoodle, they have not always had it that way - the journey to the sofa has been a long one, and they are the lucky ones.

You see; greyhounds seem to be special and not for a good reason. Unlike cockapoos or labradoodles, people think that if they can train greyhounds to run fast, and win races, they can make a little money from them. But when this stops what happens? After years of exploitation and deprivation, they are cast aside at the end of their 'careers'. They are worthless, and if lucky, will end up in a dog's home to eventually be rehomed. If not, well - I have heard many horrible stories of which I will not express here.

But isn't 'dog racing' regulated? Well it is. But horse racing is too, and we have all heard stories about that industry - haven't we. According to the League Against Cruel Sports; an average of nine racing greyhounds are injured each day, at least 200 greyhounds died trackside in 2020 and thousands of dogs remain kennelled even after they are retired. This is not a dog's life – it is much worse.

Greyhound racing in Oxford was a thing of the past, and the past is where it should stay. Reopening the stadium would represent a step back in time, and by supporting it you would be endorsing the legalised abuse of dogs - "man's best friend" - where even the lucky ones have to struggle to have a normal well-adjusted life after they have stopped racing. If they were another breed; the labradoodle or the cockapoo, would this be acceptable?

Now, I am not speaking to you today as a politician. As I am sure some of you know I am a county councillor and a district councillor a little further down the road. If I was to do that, coming in, telling you what to do with your land and facilities, it would be real cheek. But I am not doing that today. I am here to appeal to your sense of compassion and kindness, where all sentient living beings should be able to live a life free from financial exploitation, where dogs should just be dogs and have a comfy life on the sofa, running when they want to, and where we are not making money out of what is legalised cruelty and abuse.

Please – support the motion to oppose reopening the Oxford stadium this evening – stop greyhound racing, it is the right thing to do, and Baz would thank you if he could.

Written response provided by Cllr Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery and Partnerships

The council has taken a position for some years now that it wishes to maintain community use on the site of the Oxford Stadium. Oxford has great housing needs but we have always sought to ensure that housing is supported with living communities which means shops, community and leisure space within easy access of homes.

The council therefore was delighted that we were able to argue successfully at our Local Plan hearings that this site was a community asset and needed to be retained for community use. This was the end of a 15 year campaign. The community use includes a wide range of leisure uses for which it already has planning permission (planning being the only area in which the city council does have jurisdiction) such as speedway, go karts, a dance studio - as well as greyhound racing.

It is important to state that this council has NO jurisdiction on whether or not greyhound racing takes place at Oxford Stadium. The new owner of the lease would be able to do all of the things I previously mentioned, including greyhound racing, without needing planning permission. Greyhound racing is regulated not by the City Council but by the national body, the Greyhound Board of Great Britain (GBGB).

People will have different personal views about greyhound racing but that is what they are – personal views. Our personal views will have no influence one way or another on whether greyhound racing returns to Oxford Stadium.

I was very pleased, as were many other people in Oxford, to see that the owner is planning to bring Speedway back to Oxford Stadium and is working hard to bring the stadium back into proper community use for the benefit of local people.

3. Address by Kaddy Beck – The Save Bertie Park Campaign

The Save Bertie Park campaign is trying to save a recreation ground in South Oxford which is threatened with development. We have no real dialogue with the council. We make our points. The council makes the same formulaic comments. The plans may or may not be altered, and the consultation can be kicked down the road.

Alex Hollingsworth says that the council has the twin goals of making sure that our children have places to play AND the hope of being able to live in Oxford.

The problem is that we are being asked to choose between precisely these two goals.

We have been told that Bertie Park has been allocated for development in local plans for years. Why would anybody judge our recreation ground to be surplus to requirements? The answer is that somebody noticed that there was a vacant site adjoining Bertie Park that was, itself, unsuitable for development. The original intention was not to destroy a recreation ground, but move it. All of the local plans have therefore included the very important proviso that planning permission will only be given if the recreation ground is re-provided on the vacant site.

It is council policy that recreation grounds should be surrounded by a buffer zone, but the current proposal is that the playground and multi use games area should be squeezed into the housing development with the MUGA under kitchen windows and not a blade of grass to be seen. The only thing that will be “moved” onto the vacant site is the green space.

The council aims to re-provide this as a nature reserve.

Our understanding is that this nature reserve will not be created from scratch. It has long had its access restricted in order to combat anti-social behaviour. So. The deal is that the council will improve access by repairing or upgrading the bridge and improving the existing path around the nature reserve.

The last time the council asked the police (unless the council manages to get them to change their advice) it was not considered safe for unaccompanied children. And we have a list of the activities that currently take place on our green space that could not take place on a nature reserve.

Alex says the current plans “strike a good balance between the demands of past, current and future generations”. Our recreation ground is a community resource which caters for young people of all ages. It is wrong to pit the needs of our young people against the housing needs of future generations.

Alex says that it would not be fair to ask other councils in Oxfordshire to allocate sites for housing, and to not do the same ourselves. We hear discussion of many possible sites for housing around the park, but all of this would make Bertie Park more, not less necessary. There is nowhere else so central, bisected by a major cycle route. When talking to Sport England, they commented on the potential of the site and said that they would have looked favourably on an application for a grant for installation of a trim trail and some extra benches. If the council builds on this land it is gone forever.

Alex has said many times that there was extensive consultation on this plan. But when they carried out their extensive consultation, which questions did they ask?

- When they asked the police whether the vacant site was appropriate for a recreation ground, the answer was no.
- Did they ask if we wanted a new housing development squeezed into our recreation ground? This was never even in the plan!

Alex has also said “I don’t see how not building any affordable homes at all does anything but make the existing problem worse”. We are not asking the council to stop

building homes. We would like the council to build its way out of Oxford's housing shortage by building the right homes in the right places.

Bertie park just is not, and never was, the right place.

Written response provided by Cllr Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

This site has been allocated for development in successive Local Plans dating back nearly 20 years. The process of making that allocation involved assessment of the site and repeated rounds of public consultation. The current detailed design for the development has already been subject to consultation and further rounds of consultation will happen as the scheme moves into the formal planning application process.

The address uses my words extensively and with familiarity, and profoundly disagrees with them. I on the other hand continue to stand by them absolutely.

The following speaker did not attend the meeting to make the address.

4. Address by Safieh Kabir on behalf of ACORN – prefabricated housing

The post-war prefabricated houses are testament to the dream of post war council housing, both the good and the bad. The prefabs were positive as a mass council housing project in their time, but they were only ever meant to be temporary. Currently the houses leak heat and let in cold drafts through thin walls, misfitting windows and doors. Residents are shelling out large amounts of precious income on heating bills during a national energy crisis. Walls and ceilings are structurally unsound, meaning small changes can result in breakages, or issues like boiler leaks can mean a ceiling caves in. Residents chase repairs with long delays, emailing and calling on either side of intensive work-days and childcare responsibilities – often without response for months.

Working class people built those houses, built this city and keep it going day to day. Working class people deserve to live in safety, comfort and dignity: to know that home is a place worth living in. Residents of these houses have come together through our community union, ACORN, and have a vision and demands of what our homes and estates should look like. This is an opportunity to reshape the city according to the needs of those whom it belongs to. Through this community vision, we can begin to take climate action that serves working class people rather than bypassing us.

Rather than them getting demolished, these houses should be renovated and retrofitted to be among the best quality homes in Oxford. We propose that the Howard Houses receive investment to become a landmark of housing. We need to make good on the promise of post-WWII housing and repair them to the best condition possible, and give them top of the line retrofitting.

Will the Council commit to a programme of retrofitting and repairing these houses according to the priorities of the residents they serve? Will the Council ensure adequate support to working class inhabitants of these poorly insulated houses through a cold winter?

Written response provided by Cllr Blackings, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security and Housing the Homeless

The Council fully recognises the need for investment in its housing stock to ensure that it provides good quality accommodation for current and future residents. The Council has allocated a significant budget supplemented by bids for Government funding to support the retrofit of property which will reduce energy bills for tenants as well as deliver on the City's carbon reduction pledges. The Council has set a target of having all of its' stock at an EPC rating of C and above by 2030 and has started a programme of improvements during 21/22 starting with worst first in terms of energy performance. The Council is working on pulling together a long term programme for all of its property types including system built ones like Howards. The Council is committed to working with and engaging with residents and representative groups such as Acorn as it draws up its plans.