

**To:** Council

**Date:** 21 March 2022

**Report of:** Head of Law and Governance

**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 Pawel Swietach, Professor of Physiology (University of Oxford) – Twinning with Perm
2. Address by Karen Hewitt, Chair of Oxford Perm Association – Opposition to Ending the Twinning Agreement with Perm
3. Address by Nigel Gibson – Greyhound Racing Petition
4. Question from Alistair Morris – Community Group Tree Planting

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

### 1. Address by Pawel Swietach, Professor of Physiology (University of Oxford) – Twinning with Perm

I wish to address to the Council with respect to our petition, which after 2 days has collected over 100 signatures.

Further details are given in the link:

<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/end-oxford-s-twinning-with-russian-city-of-perm>

Cllr Upton suggested that I ask to speak directly to Council members on the next available meeting.

Briefly, in light of on-going events and their long-term fall-out, I am asking that Council ends the twinning partnership with Perm. I am petitioning this as someone who lived through communist Poland and spent teenage years in Saddam's Iraq, therefore I have experience of either side of "east-west" twinning programmes. The twinning project between Oxford and Perm operates as an association of local government, and any benefit to local people is invariably filtered through Putin's people, who hold all Perm's seats in the Duma and dominate local politics. The first UK-Poland twinning happened in 1974 between Plymouth and Gdynia, two port cities. It should not come as a surprise to you that this project was used in Poland for propaganda reasons, to legitimise communist rule in Gdynia. Plymouth did not suspend its twinning with Gdynia during the 1980s strikes, which was promptly exploited by communists to convince people that the strikers do not have the endorsement of the west. The continued link between Oxford and Perm will be used for propaganda reasons to convince ordinary Russians that we endorse Putin. I trust our Council appreciates the power and penetration of propaganda in this day.

Around the world, we see various forms of associations with Russia being uncoupled. The message we should send is a 'red card' to the authorities. People of Perm must realise that we do not endorse local Perm government. Perm is also a very unfortunate choice for a twinning city. Formerly, called Molotov, it was a 'closed' military city in Soviet times but after 30 years, it is still heavily reliant on supplying the Russian army. Indeed, the IL76 airplane engines that keep the people of Kharkiv and Kyiv awake at night are made in Perm. Moreover, even Perm's city website takes pride in these industries – even today, when these planes are bombing nurseries. Is this the sort of association Oxford wants to have? Is the continued association putting our great city in dispute? Are we really helping ordinary people?

Oxford projects to the world a message of peace and progress; but this message will be muffled by local authorities in Perm. Let us bypass local authorities and avoid photo-ops with Putin's partymembers, and, instead, support ordinary Russians more directly, like via NGOs. I know very well from communist times that city twinings had no impact on how Poland got out from behind the iron curtain – it was direct people-people contact that did it, not a signpost on the city limits or photo-ops with mayors.

I am well aware that an argument against my motion could be the case of our relationship with Bonn. We twinned with Bonn in 1947, only two years after the end of WWII. This must have been considered a high-risk project at the time, but it turned out to be a great success. However, we have now been twinned with Perm for 3 decades (since 1994) – and matters only got worse in Russia. In the history of our association, Perm and Oxford have never been more different. In contrast, 30 years were sufficient to transform West Germany into a democratic and respected state. We must draw lessons from this disappointing outcome with Perm. Must we wait another 30 years? Is the twinning *really* working?

I would like to present my case in front of the council, and propose that we twin with a Ukrainian city that really needs our help now.

**Written Response from the Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery and Partnerships, Councillor Susan Brown**

Oxford City Council utterly condemns the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian government led by President Putin. We have made it clear that Oxford's friendship links are with the cities and their people, not their governments and that they and our twinning links have been valuable in building relationships between our city and other countries. Official twinning arrangements have also allowed us to raise concerns with our twin cities about the actions of national governments – for instance in the past we

have raised serious concerns about the anti LGBTQ legislation pushed through by Putin's government with the City of Perm and expressed our solidarity for LGBTQ people in Perm. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Lord Mayor and I wrote to the Mayor of Perm condemning the invasion and expressing our support for those in Perm who were bravely opposing the war. News from Ukraine got ever more grave, and Russia's appalling breaches of international law ever greater. I therefore took the decision on 4 March that our twinning relationship with Perm was no longer tenable. I believe that the County Council, whose link with Perm Region predates ours with the City of Perm, may also be seeking to end their link.

We are sure that, even though the formal twinning link has ended, many of the personal relationships between individual citizens of our cities will be maintained, which we very much welcome as the people of Russia are now cut off from any independent news and fed a diet of state propaganda. We hope that at some point in the future we may be able to rebuild this twinning link, based on the enduring friendships that led to it being established in the first place and in the vein of our first twinning link in Oxford, that with Bonn which was set up just a couple of years after the end of the Second World War.

We continue to value our twinning links and have been in touch with our twin city of Wroclaw in Poland, where there was already a substantial Ukrainian population and which is in turn twinned with Lviv in Ukraine to ask how we might support them in their efforts to support refugees. We have also contacted the UK Government to say that Oxford stands ready to play its part in supporting Ukrainian refugees. We welcome the news that two child cancer patients and their families have been brought to our city to receive treatment and be cared for. Along with the many generous citizens offering accommodation, we are waiting to hear from the UK government how refugees will be brought here and what we need to do in order to ensure their safety and comfort. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many kind people in Oxford who have raised funds and sent donations to support Ukrainian refugees.

I want also to directly address the call that has come from some quarters to twin with a city in Ukraine. Twinning relationships take time to develop and are made through the genuine connections of dedicated citizens in Oxford with those in another city who wish to reciprocate friendship links. Over the years, we have developed a process to achieve twin city status, which includes setting up a voluntary link that evidences ongoing activity with a cross-section of communities in Oxford and the proposed twin city over a number of years. We encourage anyone who wishes to start the process of international friendship to do so. Very sadly, I do not think that any city in Ukraine is currently going to be able to focus on these sorts of issues, as they deal with the huge task of daily survival. My heart goes out to those brave civic leaders, some of whom have been kidnapped by Russian forces for refusing to give up on the task to which they were democratically elected, which is to serve and look after their local populations.

Anyone who wants more information on the twinning process can find further details on the Oxford City Council website at

[https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20139/oxford\\_international\\_links/1401/our\\_twin\\_city\\_process](https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20139/oxford_international_links/1401/our_twin_city_process)

## 2. Address by Karen Hewitt, Chair of Oxford Perm Association – Opposition to Ending the Twinning Agreement with Perm

I am the Chair of the Oxford Perm Association and I am here to ask the Council to overturn the executive decision made on 4<sup>th</sup> March to end our twinning agreement with Perm. I know that it will be difficult to persuade you, but please listen to me for 4 minutes.

Of course I condemn the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It has caused so much suffering and will cause more. Thousands of citizens of Perm also condemn it, but they are not allowed to protest as we are.

On 26<sup>th</sup> February two days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Leader of the Council made a statement thus:

*Our friendship links are with the cities and their people, not their governments, but have allowed us to raise concerns with our twin cities about national governments actions.*

This was clear and firm about the nature of our links with Perm.

Six days later, the Leader issued a new statement:

*we are taking action to end our twinning agreement until such time as Russia's appalling breaches of international law cease.*

What had changed?

The answer is that there had been an online petition, asking the Council to break the links with Perm. The councillors for some reason found the pressure from this petition intolerable. An online petition! They could have solved that situation easily. But the council did not contact me as Chair of the Oxford Perm Association, it did not consult Oxford International Links, a body set up to co-ordinate the various city links. It totally failed to find out what other Oxfordians thought.

I need hardly say that Perm City Council heard this new statement with shock and disbelief. At a time of acute stress, fear and pressure on civic institutions in Russia, why had we suddenly abandoned them when they most needed our support? Perm's German twin, Duisburg, and its American twin, Louisville, told the Mayor of Perm that they believed their long-standing civic connections were strong enough to survive until peace eventually arrived.

Who were the people who started this petition and those who clicked 'Yes'? They were not involved in any of Oxford's twinning activities. They didn't the understand that the 27 years of co-operation between Perm and Oxford – co-operation in art and dancing, in football and ethical journalism, in medical projects and neighbourhood associations, in hundreds of people from Oxford living with Perm families, and hundreds of people from Perm living with families in Oxford – that this co-operation was about the efforts of ordinary citizens to make the world a more friendly and trustworthy place.

The founder of this petition, a Pole, explained that he felt ashamed every time he entered Oxford and saw the words **Twinning with Perm, Russia**. Now Poles have plenty of reasons to dislike Russians, as do Ukrainians living in Oxford. Many of them signed the online petition. Fine – but why are they allowed priority over all the other communities which have worked happily with civic associations and the ordinary people of Perm and elsewhere for years?

Are we in Oxford willing to wipe out the words **Perm, Russia** on our noticeboard because some groups dislike (however understandably) Russians?

This is not the tolerant, liberal, decent city that I believed I lived in. In my opinion, giving into this petition is a sign of Russophobia. That is what we have come to! In times of war, hatred, fear and bitterness, Oxford should rise above such beliefs. I request you, beg you, to overturn this rather terrifying decision and re-create trust in people who need us.

Karen Hewitt

**Written Response from the Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery and Partnerships, Councillor Susan Brown**

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currently going to be able to focus on these sorts of issues, as they deal with the huge task of daily survival. My heart goes out to those brave civic leaders, some of whom have been kidnapped by Russian forces for refusing to give up on the task to which they were democratically elected, which is to serve and look after their local populations.

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### 3. Address by Nigel Gibson – Greyhound Racing Petition

“We the undersigned petition the council to work cross-party and support the development of leisure facilities at Oxford Stadium in line with the Local Plan, but that do not involve greyhound racing or gambling”

Greyhound racing failed at the Old Stadium in 2008 - there is no widespread support for this activity across the UK or for resuming it in our city; the cruelty involved in breeding and racing greyhounds is well documented, and should no longer have a part to play in a city with the prestige of Oxford.

Greyhound racing has little relevance to modern society – there is an increasing awareness of the cruelty to animals that it involves. And the focus on gambling and drinking (needed in order to make a profit), is surely not something to be encouraged anywhere and especially not in an area of high deprivation such as Blackbird Leys.

The consequences for the greyhounds involved are appalling. As well as the obvious casualties at a race, many greyhounds don't survive training and are discarded – while a small proportion may be rehomed as pets, many more simply disappear <https://www.cagednw.co.uk/greyhound-disposal.html> .

The idea of this exploitation of animals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, jars starkly when compared to the forward-thinking ambition shown by Oxford, for example in its move to have the first zero emission zone in the city centre.

Oxford City Council has designated the Old Stadium for leisure activities in the latest Local Plan. The site is currently owned by a developer, and leased to someone who is planning to reopen the Stadium as a venue for greyhound racing. It has been noticeable that since the announcement, other activities have been suggested as a supplement – unrelated to greyhound racing, but looking to appeal as a way of justifying operating alongside this cruel 'sport'. As a campaign group, we have already suggested many of these activities as part of the alternative solution – and that solution would be cruelty-free.

Instead of focusing on gambling and alcohol, the site can be put to much better use as a leisure facility that is inclusive, providing a range of participatory activities for all ages and dis/abilities, centred around Oxford's reputation as a cycling city through the development of a velodrome. This focus will enable a variety of cycling activities as well as the attraction of an elite sport, offering a hub for additional activities including reuse of the existing building and land.

This use would better reflect what people actually want from leisure activity nowadays – to stay fitter, to stay active for longer, and so have more fulfilling lifestyles. There is a need for facilities to match these needs.

The current ambition for the facility is doomed to fail – the Stadium closed over 10 years ago because greyhound racing (and speedway) proved economically unviable. This was because both activities were historic rather than current, and the decreasing demographic they were able to attract then is even smaller now as it appeals less to younger people. There is no reason to suggest that returning to such a use would thrive.

And with failure, the developers may well then take the opportunity to argue that as it is not economic, no other leisure activities can succeed, and that inevitably more housing should then take its place. That would certainly be a justification for their investment in a land bank, BUT, whilst more housing is welcome and desirable across Oxford, facilities to support the quality of life of the inhabitants, such as green space and leisure activities, must also be present to balance any increase in housing density. And we must remember that this location has been designated by Council for leisure under the Plan – it can have no other use.

Outside London there is nowhere between Southampton and Derby for elite-level cycling that would be suitable for potential Olympians. A velodrome in Oxford could provide just such a focus, an ideal addition to our city with its heritage in and reputation for cycling.

And apart from the elite cycling, a velodrome, as shown in places like Herne Hill Velodrome, <https://www.hernehillvelodrome.com> , would support related, sustainable and complementary activities like BMX, go-karting, climbing wall, dance, arts, café and community space and a range of other activities, including Frank Bruno's Wellness Hub, to support physical and mental health, for all ages and abilities.

Oxford is renowned as a city of bicycles and not just for students, stretching back to the tradition of most workers cycling each day to and from the Car factory, to nowadays being the most convenient mode of transport with minimal impact on climate change. We need to look forward, not back.

We are looking to you, our Councillors, who have been voted in in part to take responsibility for the health and wellbeing of the people of Oxford, to work together, cross-party, to support the ambition of many and ensure that accessible, participatory, sustainable and very 'green' leisure activities are provided for the many that want and need them.

**Written Response from the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism,  
Councillor Mary Clarkson**

The Council's involvement at the Oxford Stadium was to ensure the site was protected for community use. We do not own the Stadium or play a role in running it, and there is no decision within the remit of Oxford City Council as to whether or not greyhound racing returns to Oxford Stadium. The licensing of the racing would be by the national body, the National Greyhound Board of Great Britain, not the Council.

The site is allocated in the Local Plan for community and leisure uses with enabling residential development on the car park. Policy SP51 states that in circumstances in which speedway and greyhound racing are not viable, "...residential-led development supported by appropriate uses that will benefit the wider community, for example, complimentary leisure or community uses...will be supported". The City Council will consider any planning application for the site in this context.



#### **4. Question from Alistair Morris – Community Group Tree Planting**

*Question to the Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction, Councillor Lubna Arshad*

Speaking to Council 4 years ago, I asked why Community Groups could not be more involved in Council work. Here we are 4 years later in the midst of a Climate Crisis, and still nothing has happened. I refer specifically to planting trees along street verges, at the very least, replacing those that have been removed/felled, which I believe are supposed to be replaced. The council may be too busy/not have the finances, but why can responsibility not be passed to community groups? All you need do is check for services, recommend correct tree species, show us how you would like the trees planted and let us get on with it!!! We can supply tools, materials, trees and labour! Why is that sooooo hard to do? The IPCC said recently, that we are on track for an unsurvivable future, and yet we just carry on INCREASING our emissions. I know the Council is doing a lot, but there is more you could easily be doing. YOU HAVE GOT TO DELEGATE, and trust in people's resources, energy and commitment! For their own mental health, if nothing else!

Best future, or at the very least, a future please, Alistair Morris

#### **Written Response from the Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction, Councillor Lubna Arshad**

Oxford City Council is using this Platinum Jubilee year to contribute to *the national Queen's Green Canopy* (QGC) project – a project that encourages everyone including individuals, community groups, organisations, schools and businesses to “**Plant a Tree for the Jubilee**”. This coincides with launching the implementation of our Urban Forest Strategy which was published last year.

In response to the climate emergency, Oxford City Council has planted over 10,000 new trees in its green spaces in the last 5 years. What we need now is help to increase the number of street trees and in order to achieve this we will engage with our communities.

Planting and maintaining healthy street trees is an involved and costly process. This is due to the complexities of establishing viable tree pits adjacent to highways in pavement areas and verges with subsurface utilities, and the on-going care needed to avoid root compaction and canopy health. The Council does not always have control of the land, but where we do, ODS states that the cost of purchase, establishment, watering, on-going arboriculture care and insurance of each street tree costs around £20,000 during the course of its life. We would welcome support from community groups to help us raise funds for more street trees and to help us maintain them, particularly with watering.

This month the City Council is launching a Street Tree Sponsorship scheme. We are looking for sponsors to fund the initial phase to establish a tree pit, purchase and plant a semi-grown tree and water it for the first three years. We plan to provide a new avenue of street trees in at least one location to mark the Jubilee.

We are working with the Oxfordshire Trees Collaborate Group (part of the CAG network) to design a city wide campaign to encourage residents to plant a tree in their own garden or communal space. We are providing links and advice on what and how to plant, and where possible, the trees themselves. We will be linking in to many community groups across the city to help us deliver this and we welcome your support.

With regard to tree felling the Council has a Tree Policy which makes a commitment to replacing trees that have been felled or removed. Trees need to be felled for a variety of reasons and in some cases it is not possible to replace the tree in the same location. The City Council will try to improve our communication where this is the case.