

Address by Catriona Hobbs:

I am here today because I love this city; I love its swimming pools, I love its ice rink. I grew up here and I support the Council's agreed strategy for 2020-2024.

Your strategy talks about the Oxford Model: wholly-owned companies and commercial properties which create jobs, support the local economy and provide additional funds that support the delivery of public services. It talks about supporting social enterprises and cooperatives and thriving communities, and it talks about Oxford being a world class city.

I truly understand that these are very difficult times for councils. You've got a lack of funding and ambition for public services from national government, falling numbers for leisure services from the pandemic and you've got unhelpful procurement laws. But this council should not allow itself to be pressurised by Serco or any other bidder. You represent the people of Oxford.

If there is pressure, do you want to work with that for the next 10 years or pay millions to get out of it early when the contract doesn't deliver or ends up costing more? Because Serco will squeeze the council at every opportunity, every re-negotiation. That's how this company works and they have a whole legal department behind them which is far bigger than this council's. That is a huge risk and a huge distraction to your mission.

Whilst Oxford City Council is trying to get into a contract with Serco, other councils are shelling out to get out. Just this month Peterborough announced that it is ending its contract with Serco seven years early, bringing 275 staff in-house: ending the contract to save money and bring best value to residents, and I quote: "We are satisfied that the savings we will make over the next seven years will far outweigh the sum we have agreed (an undisclosed sum) with Serco to exit the contract". There are many other examples too which I don't have time to go into now.

Other councils are also insourcing leisure services. Haringey's deputy leader has said 'having control of our leisure services is the right step. We live in the borough, we understand and use the services ourselves. This is the way we can provide the best service.' Tower Hamlets and Warrington are other examples.

The Association for Public Service Excellence has said that councils have been insourcing leisure because they've been handing over money to cover losses and getting very little back for it, which by the way is a repeating story in the public sector with private companies.

I have been keeping a close eye on Serco's failures for ten years now. I believe the evidence is abundantly clear. Serco's expertise is in winning contracts and extracting as much value as possible, not in delivering high quality services. There has been no public consultation about this: there should be one. I am here today to beg you to please press pause on this decision. Please ask the community, hold a public consultation. Please look again at all the options. Please look again at insourcing and please say no to Serco so that Oxford can continue to be a world class city.

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