

To: Council

Date: 29 January 2024

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

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

1. Address from Isabel Tucker – Operation of Gloucester Green Market

As you'll no doubt be aware, Oxford's historic charter market, now operating at Gloucester Green, used to be run by Oxford City Council. Since 2013, the operation of this market has been outsourced to a company called LSD Promotions, and in March 2023 Oxford City Council decided to renew their contract, following a re-tendering process. The new contract between LSD and Oxford City Council has not yet been finalised, and I am here today to urge you not to sign it. This market has declined markedly since it was operated by LSD. They shouldn't be allowed to run our market any longer.

Why do I say this? It's because the market has become dominated by street food. LSD introduced a street food row at the bus station end of the market some years ago. It's a welcome innovation and is very popular, but it's expanded and is encroaching on the rest of the market, now taking up space in another row, and leaving less than two rows for other stalls. The tables and chairs needed for the street food also take up a lot of space, so the layout is more spacious, and the number of stalls in the rest of the market has gone down significantly. The street food is clearly the most profitable part of the market, but the rest of the market should not be being neglected in this way.

The market operates on four days a week: Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. The Saturday market, a general market, isn't so much of a concern, but on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, the non-street-food area is much depleted. Wednesdays were the day on which local people might do their shopping because fresh food and household goods were sold then. However, we've lost a huge number of these stalls.¹ Some of the space is filled up with jewellery stalls. One Wednesday, I counted eight of them, even though jewellery isn't part of the normal Wednesday offering. The situation is similar on Thursdays and Fridays.

Why has a vibrant and popular market with lots of potential declined so badly? One reason is that the fees have gone up considerably since LSD took over. A basic stall on a Wednesday costs a minimum of £38, excluding electricity and waste disposal. Compare this to the cost of a stall at Witney or Chipping Norton: stalls at both those markets, which are run by the District Council, cost £22 a day. One of the Thursday traders recently told me that LSD had told them they were going to raise the stall fee to £60 day. When she protested, they said they might limit it to £50. One trader who comes on a Wednesday pays £55 for his space at Gloucester Green, but £10 at a market in Wiltshire.

It looks very much as if LSD won't run the market in the way the council intends. Through a Freedom of Information request (FOI 2023 000493), I got a redacted copy of the council's draft re-tender specification, their statement of requirements, and LSD's tender. Obviously, the council wants this market to contribute to its strategy and objectives, most relevantly, thriving communities and an inclusive economy. The draft specification and the statement of requirements make it clear that the council wanted the market days to be properly themed and differentiated, but, as I said before, there's little sign of that at the moment, with jewellery stalls proliferating on all days and taking up space that could be used by stalls that tie in with the theme of that day. The council also stated that they wanted proper consultation with local residents, but again, there seems to be little of that at the moment, and I am not aware of any having happened over the last ten years.

There's quite a gulf between what LSD claims it will do and what it is doing at Gloucester Green at the moment. In its response to the statement of requirements, it says, in Case Study 1 on page 14, that there is a 'huge range of fresh food and products with inspirational recipe ideas', when in fact there are only a small number of stalls selling fresh food, and the range is narrow. There are no recipe ideas on offer. They cite 'a fabulous selection of stalls offering a huge variety', when there is a preponderance of jewellery stalls and not much variety. The 'fashion fare' they mention seems to consist of some T-shirts, one or two stalls selling second-hand clothes and the occasional appearance of a couple of stalls selling Indian-style clothing.

¹ Among those that are gone are a fruit and vegetable stall, a stall selling fresh bread and cakes (of the cheaper variety), and a stall selling cheese, eggs, cold meat and pies. There were also stalls selling fresh meat, luggage, underwear and nightwear, picture frames, pet food and accessories, and indoor and outdoor plants, but they've all gone as well now, and there are always several empty stalls.

They don't explain what they mean by 'urban mix style', and anyway, this seems to be in conflict with the council's desire to have the weekday markets properly themed.

In their answer to Question 7 (on p. 17), LSD says that they 'welcome sellers with fresh, organic fruit and vegetables', whereas in practice they discontinued the farmers' market that used to operate at Gloucester Green and made it impossible for traders selling organic produce to continue. They also intend (apparently) to welcome sellers of 'the finest essentials' and 'wholesome specialist food and drink products'. There is currently one stall on a Wednesday that sells expensive pâté, cheese and wine, but little else in this regard.

Gloucester Green Market is a key amenity and should be used to help generate wealth locally and keep it in the community. A stall at this is one of the more affordable trading spaces in a city with high commercial rents. Hiring out these stalls at a reasonable price would be a way of helping local businesses (not just street food and jewellery businesses) to trade. A lot of shops have closed at the northern end of the city centre, and Gloucester Green could play an important role in enabling people to buy items they would have bought in Boswells or Debenhams, for example, and might otherwise buy online. Excessive online shopping drains a city of its wealth, life and variety, but a good local market can help revive it. We should enable Gloucester Green to fulfil its potential for generating wealth locally and preventing it from 'trickling up'. Oxford is fast becoming a 'clone town', and Gloucester Green market could help us buck this trend.

I have consulted quite widely with other local residents at community events and through social media and civil society organisations, and a great many of them miss the old market and object to seeing our market run down by a private contractor. Here, for example, is one response:

"I was glad to pick up your leaflet at the Green Fair on Saturday. Yes, Gloucester Green Market has definitely lost most of its useful stalls, over recent years, just as Oxford has lost most of its independent shops. With Council business rates so unaffordable, I would hope that our local markets can fill the gap.

Not long ago, I remember that the Wednesday GG market sold a much greater variety of fresh food: ingredients, not just street-food 'ready-meals'. Lee's Cheese, for example, is much missed, and I know several people who no longer bother to go to the market, now he is no longer there selling affordable and varied cheeses both British and European. There used to be stalls selling spices, jams and pickles... and several bakers with good bread. A butcher's van, too - and game in season. I would definitely like stalls like these to come back.

Non-food stalls used to sell luggage and handbags (my favourite backpack came from there!) and affordable clothes, including lovely cotton items from India and Vietnam. In the spring and summer, there were gardening and plant stalls, sometimes."

The council needs to consider other ways of running this market. It could be run by a social enterprise, for example. Councils up and down the country are finding good ways to run their markets, and Oxford City Council could perhaps learn from them. Above all, it's important to ask, why, if this market is profitable for LSD, it couldn't be profitable for the council itself. If the council ran it, any profit made could be invested back into the market or into other council services. It would surely have long-term benefits for our community too, supporting small businesses and enabling new enterprises to get off the ground.

I urge the council not to sign this contract and to reconsider the decision to outsource the operation of this market to LSD. There are other options, and the people of Oxford deserve a better market than this

2. Address from Cat Hobbs – Oxford's Leisure Contract to Serco

I was truly appalled to find out that Oxford City Council, which has been such a leader in insourcing and direct running of council services, is planning to hand over its leisure contract to Serco. I grew up in Oxford and have spent most of my life here - I love Hinksey Pool and the ice rink and have regularly used the other leisure facilities too.

I work at the Old Music Hall on Cowley Road at We Own It which campaigns for public services that work for people not profit. I have been aware of Serco's unbelievably bad track record for over a decade now.

I would like to highlight five examples of the company having contracts ended early or earlier than expected - because it didn't provide the value for money, control and flexibility or service quality that the public sector needed.

2013: Serco had a contract to run the out of hours GP service in Cornwall. It left surgeries short of doctors and then falsified data 252 times. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/jul/11/serco-gp-out-of-hours-substandard>

2015: Thurrock Council in Essex ended Serco's back office services contract 5 years early because it wasn't providing value for money. The council had to pay £10 million to exit the contract early but said it would save £4 million a year as a result. The council leader said he wanted profits to go towards services for local people, not Serco's shareholders. <https://www.thurrockgazette.co.uk/news/13495275.council-leader-speaks-out-after-20m-serco-contract-is-terminated/>

2019: Serco's contract with the Scottish government to provide asylum accommodation came to an end and was not renewed. Serco treated the people relying on its service - including parents, pregnant women and children - with a lack of dignity. <https://www.scottishhousingnews.com/articles/serco-loses-government-s-asylum-accommodation-contract-in-scotland>

2022: Serco's contract to run the Caledonian Sleeper railway service was ended 7 years early. Serco tried to renegotiate the contract. The Transport Minister in Scotland said it did not represent 'value for money to the public'. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/02/caledonian-sleeper-rail-service-to-be-nationalised-by-scottish-ministers>

2024: Peterborough City Council has just announced it will end its contract with Serco 7 years early to save money and provide 'best value for residents'. The council had to pay an undisclosed sum but said the savings would outweigh this cost. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67962092>

I really do understand that these are incredibly difficult times for councils with the ongoing, deeply damaging policy of underfunding and austerity from national government. I know you have difficult decisions to make but this is not the way forward.

Serco, as a multinational company with teams of lawyers, is well placed to benefit from contracts with the public sector. Whatever sweeteners it may offer now, it may be viewing this contract as a loss leader from which it will ultimately benefit financially, as we have seen in the examples above.

I implore you to think again so that Oxford's vitally important swimming pools, leisure facilities and ice rink can provide the high quality service we expect, the control the council needs and the value for money that we all deserve in our wonderful city.

3. Address from Diana Volpe – Oxford's Leisure Contract to Serco

Given that

1. Serco Leisure is a part of the Serco Group PLC, and is therefore functionally indistinguishable and an integral part of Serco;
2. Serco has a reputation as a leading name in running immigration detention centres for profit, a motive that inevitably seeks to drive down costs to the detriment of those subject to immigration control, and earning a terrible track record in doing so. These include, but are not limited to: cases of accommodation filled with [rats, cockroaches, and sinks filled with sewage](#); allegations of abuse by Serco staff at Yarl's Wood culminating in [a highly critical report](#) by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons in 2015; systematic denial of abuse and degrading treatment even in the face of over 100 migrant women [going on hunger strike in protest of their conditions](#) in 2018;
3. Oxford's repeatedly asserted its aspiration to be a city of sanctuary;
4. The public feels strongly about this decision, as evidenced by the pushback and the petition arising from the news of this bid;
5. That this bid includes plans to convert much sought-after hall space in Blackbird Leys in ways that may take away important community spaces from local sports clubs that are dedicated and inclusive to women and nonbinary people, as well as other marginalised populations;

I ask: Were ethical considerations taken into account as part of the decision making process? Do you not see a fundamental contradiction between SERCO's well-documented abuse of asylum seekers and refugees, and Oxford's aspiration to be a Local Authority of Sanctuary?

By proceeding with this, you are essentially sending a message to our community that it is acceptable to take money funding for public infrastructure through the exploitation of migrants, all while claiming to be a place of refuge for them.

4. Address from Maryam Firdous Ahmed – Anti-BDS Bill

I am speaking here today to emphasise the draconian "anti-boycott bill." This bill outlines the stopping of "businesses and organisations including those affiliated with Israel-being targeted through ongoing boycotts by public bodies." I and many members of the public feel this is a flagrant disregard for the democratically institutional rights that this country emphasises.

I am sure everyone here is aware of the U.K government's role in the South African anti-apartheid movement that gathered pace in the 1960s. Which gained the support of the United Nations General Assembly with a call for economic measures including the boycott of South Africa goods. By 1985 a total of 121 local authorities adopted a statement in some respect to South Africa. Whilst the U.K government continued to resist. When Nelson Mandela addressed the U.K parliament in 1966, his most fulsome thanks was not for the 'wisdom' of the U.K government that opposed the boycott divestment and sanctions movement. Instead it was millions of Britons who through the years and like others elsewhere in the world stood up to no to apartheid." I see history infolding in front in a cruel way, with Britain once again being on the wrong side. There are clear lessons to be learnt from the BDS movement in South Africa which seem to elude us. I ask that in the same vein that Oxford City Council path the way for leading historical change. I ask that that this council be the pioneer for change so history books and the people of Palestine can look towards Oxford as beacon of hope. To channel the notions and ideas that are taught within the University, to place those within reality. I see no hope if we do not internalise these learnings and move forward to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

History books do not long fondly on Britain and its legacy of empire. It is pure hypocrisy to champion democracy, free speech whilst in the same breath opposing the very means by which citizens can exercise this right. As a young person I feel the government increasingly despotic actions as isolating a new generation of enfranchised youth who are aware of the hypocrisy, corruption in state institutions. I ask you to remember that a large cohort of young people will make up the cohort of the voters, newly enfranchised youth who are tired and want change. I ask each of you if you truly believe in liberty and democracy, and you hold these values true to oppose the anti-boycott bill. To listen to your moral conscience and do right by the people. To allow Britons to exercise their democratic right to boycott. I ask that Britain write itself positively in the history books for once.

5. Question from Chaka Artwell – Female Sanitary Products

Without enduring any opposition, criticism or debate, the Green Councillor, Ms Rawle's motion for female sanitary products to made available in Oxford City Council's male toilets was approved, at November's Full Council meeting.

Oxford's biological male population has no biological use for the functionally designed female sanctuary product.

Therefore, Cllr Rawle's motion is a City Council approved flagrant waste of public money, to endorse the current left-wing culture wars, and uphold Stonewall's LGBTQIAP2S evangelical creed.

Will Oxford City Council reverse its decision to waste public money by purchasing female sanitary products for display in male public toilets?

Will Oxford City Council oppose the biological deception, for politically correct reasons, of requiring biological human beings, by their self-assigned gender ad hocly on any given morning.