

**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

1. Address from Isabel Tucker – Operation of Gloucester Green Market
2. Address from Emma Jones – Oxford's Leisure Contract to Serco
3. Address from Maryam Firdous Ahmed – Anti-BDS Bill
4. Question from Chaka Artwell – Female Sanitary Products

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 a 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.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

## **Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships**

During the last 10 years, Gloucester Green market has grown from a small market operating on two days a week to operating over four days a week; the number and range of stalls has grown significantly as have the number of visitors. The bulk of that growth has happened since the current operator, LSD Promotions, took over the running of the market 10 years ago.

Since the pandemic in 2020, which had a significant impact on the market, occupancy rates have been steadily increasing and that growth is in line with, or just above the national trends supplied by NABMA (national association of British markets) and NMTF (national market traders federation)

As an example of that growth, these are the average stall numbers per week:

- Sept 2021 – 151
- Sept 2022 – 166
- April 2023 – 192

The table below shows a snap shot of the number of stalls let in 2023 compared to the same month of 2022. This demonstrates healthy growth levels.

<b>Month</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
April	697	760
July	779	797
Sept	765	854
Nov	794	962

We are clearly seeing a shift from the older more traditional market stall uses to more demand for new uses such as street food coupled with entertainment and experiential uses. This is a nationwide trend shift, not just in Oxford. There is no doubt that street food is one of the largest growth categories, but the number of stalls dedicated to street food (on average 19/20) still remain less than half of the total market stalls and therefore cannot be classed as a dominating category.

An average Wednesday market still has 2 large stall holders comprising of 10 stalls each offering fruit and veg. 2 stalls selling bread, 2 stalls for cakes, 1 stall for cheese and 1 fishmonger.

As a result of changing trends, our market operator is currently drafting a leasing strategy for letting of stalls like the one we have for the Covered Market. This will set out their target mix of uses going forward which will be in line with national trends and demands of the local community.

The loss of the farmers' market stalls was extremely disappointing. The main reason for this was the lack of interest from stall holders. LSD tried a number of initiatives such as promoting on social media and investing in new stall covers to differentiate and highlight the farmers stalls, all in an attempt to get this category re-established. Farmers market and organic produce is often more expensive and often competes with the high demand for lower priced produce.

Stall rates increased in October 2022, which was the first increase in 3 years and amounted to an increase of £2 per stall per day for non-food operators. Food &

beverage stall holders incurred an additional £2 increase for electricity. This increase was as a last resort to cover some contribution towards the increases in waste collections and utilities.

Stall rates are variable depending on the type of stall, ie. Street Food vs standard stall use and depending which market day, to reflect demand. Standard rate stalls range from £15 to £45 per day, food & beverage stalls range from £48 to £65 per day – in both cases there are reduced rates for regular stall holders and those occupying multiple stalls.

Comparing Oxford stall rates with those of other markets such as Witney and Chipping Norton are not a true like for like. Smaller market towns have a fraction of the footfall and are not comparable with central Oxford. A stall at Gloucester Green on a Friday, which is the newest market day starts at £22. This would seem to be a very reasonable stall rate, that I'm sure would be hard to match by any other city market of a comparable size to Oxford.

A market is a great opportunity for anyone with a business idea to establish themselves and make that first step on the business ladder. They can test the water with minimal capital outlay, allowing them to identify their customers and refine their business model. Many businesses that started on Gloucester Green market have gone on to establish themselves elsewhere in the city and beyond, one example is Taste of China who now trade from the Covered Market, after having first tested their business model and products at Gloucester Green. This is because a market like Gloucester Green is able to react more quickly than any other type of premises to changes in consumer behaviour and the broader environment for businesses. For example, 15 years ago there was a single convenience supermarket in and around Oxford City Centre selling fruit and vegetables at affordable prices. Now there are more like 10, something that is bound to impact on the nature of the goods sold at the market. Similarly the number, range and type of delicatessens, clothes shops and hot food outlets has changed to a huge extent. The fact that sellers at Gloucester Green have been able to respond to those changes with new products and offers is exactly why the market is so successful.

LSD support a number of community initiatives, some linked to the Old Fire Station where free stalls are provided. They also provide free stalls on Arts Fridays, providing 30 free stalls over the period of October – December last year. In addition they support young traders as part of the Young Traders Market national initiative and heavily subsidise stalls to 'Lazy Sunday' which is a local community initiative and the Jericho Street Fair.

This statement comes as no surprise. I have already spent a significant amount of time since our first meeting in 2022, responding to concerns and allegations of the Gloucester Green market being a dying market that's in decline, yet there is no supporting evidence that this is the case.

When we conducted a walk around the market with Cllr Aziz in December 2022, we met with a number of traders, those we met did not convey the same level of concerns that are being raised here. We met many long serving regular stall holders, with a small number travelling some distance to trade at Gloucester Green. The fishmonger (still there today) travelled from Swindon because he claims that footfall in Gloucester Green was far greater than at his local market.

The council shares in the financial success of the market by way of a licence fee. We are not in the business of running markets unlike LSD and cannot benefit from economies of scale in the same way. There would be significant risk and potential financial pressure in bringing the operation of the market in-house.

Furthermore, having gone through a formal tender process and awarded a contract, the Council are legally bound to fulfil their obligations of the tendering.

The Council have set out a number of contractual terms including KPI's, which require LSD to report quarterly on their performance against these:

- Set out a leasing strategy defining mix of uses based on market trends and demand
- Increase footfall and stall uptake
- Attract new consumer demographics
- Improve public perception
- Transparency on stall rates and fees, inc. any discounts to support new starters
- Improve visitor experience
- Demonstrate any further initiatives for market growth
- Increase online media following

It's a requirement that our market operator work collaboratively with all stakeholders, including the public. It's concerning that LSD have reached out to you twice in the last year with an offer to meet in person to discuss your concerns, yet you have turned down this opportunity which would have seemed a positive step and a way forward.

## **2. Address from Emma Jones – Oxford's Leisure Contract to Serco**

*Emma Jones deputised for Diana Volpe*

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.

### **Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships**

Thank you for your addresses raising your concerns about Oxford City Council's Cabinet decision to award the Leisure Management Contract to Serco Leisure.

It is important to note that Serco Leisure Operating Limited (SLOL) has not been implicated in any reports of this nature referred to in point two of your statement and the Council can only consider the behaviour and performance of Serco Leisure Ltd as the bidding company in its assessment of the bid. We cannot consider issues raised relating to other companies in deciding the procurement outcome.

As you mention, it is a challenging financial situation for Council's. Nationally, several Councils have declared that they are unable to balance their budgets, where many are reducing their leisure provision, and in some cases closing leisure centres. The Council is keen to ensure that our leisure offer is one that is sustainable in the longer term, provides much improved services, looks to strongly align with health priorities, whilst also being accessible and affordable to our diverse communities in the City.

We want Oxford to be a place where everyone feels welcome, and we remain committed to our work supporting refugees and asylum seekers and celebrating the contribution they make to our society.

Following a transparent and competitive process which has fully complied with procurement policies and legal requirements, Serco Leisure presented a bid that matches the priorities of the Council whilst also driving investment and improving quality within our facilities which includes new gym equipment.

Serco Leisure are committed to delivering a range of concessions which includes free swimming for under 17s and they will also create a c£60k local inclusion and access fund to help more inactive people to become physically active.

Serco Leisure is one of the country's leading leisure operators and is the current UK Pool and Spa water Leisure Operator of the year. They also manage Stoke Mandeville Stadium, the birthplace of the Paralympic movement, national sports centres such as Bisham Abbey and Lilleshall, alongside many local authority centres including Birmingham, a City of Sanctuary and have recently been awarded the leisure contract in Buckinghamshire.

The appointment of the leisure operator is a legal process that follows procurement law and is not open to political intervention. Serco Leisure's tender scored best against the Council's criteria which included qualitative and financial elements, and which we are legally required to accept.

### **3. 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.

#### **Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships**

Thank you very much for another very eloquent speech, Maryam. I'm sure you are aware we have an item on the agenda motion that we will be discussing shortly, and I hope you will be here for the outcome. We all have a great deal of sympathy with what was said.

#### **4. 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.

**Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships**

The motion that I think you are referring to was passed in July 2022 and was about the provision of Sanitary products within our buildings and community centres. Not in men's toilets but women's toilets. In November, there was a follow up question from Councillor Pegg which I answered in Council about exactly where they were being provided and listed the places. I will read out the response I made at the time:

*We have provided free products in the toilets of most of our community centres since August 2022. The products are displayed in the toilets alongside a poster that has information about who to contact if someone needs more products. Staff in our community centres will check when products need replacing and contact a distributor when they need more products. We haven't managed to reach all of the community centres as yet, but there is a plan in place to get products into these locations as soon as possible.*

*To fund the project, Oxford City Council used a combination of facilities budget, contribution from the Federation of Oxford Community Associations and the Household Support Fund.*

*Oxford City Council also work in partnership with a number of partners and organisations to 17 distribute products across the city in community centres as well as to community groups. We share a donation box in one of our local Tesco stores with the Wings project. The Wings Project is a part of the Young Women's Music Project. We also take opened products which Wings are unable to use to reduce waste.*

*Since the project began, we have had really positive feedback from members of the public such as "I didn't know you did this, what a great initiative" and "I'm really pleased to see this".*

*The products are well used, and people are reaching out if they are in need.*

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