

To: Council

Date: 7 October 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 Mr. Greg Owen – Spindleberry Nature Reserve

I'm a resident of Greater Leys and a member of a new group of volunteers The Friends of Spindleberry Nature Reserve. My question is to the Cabinet Member for Planning. It concerns the Knights Road Site allocated as residential in the Local Plan 2036. It is part of the Blackbird Leys redevelopment project on which the Council is partnered with Peabody. The site is under construction and includes part of Spindleberry Nature Park. I don't know why the Council designated part of our Nature Reserve for residential use and I don't know why they have given sole responsibility for it in perpetuity to Peabody. Especially as the Council still own it. I do know residents have concerns about it. In my case informed by my familiarity with the planning permission and the associated documents and conditions. Condition 9 and it's approved Construction Environmental Management Plan dictates that two Biodiversity Exclusion Zones were to be established inclusive of this part of the Nature Reserve. On Page 6 paragraph 2.2.2 bullet point 2 it denies contractors access to these fenced off areas during the construction phase unless associated with the new planting. In the summer I had fears that changes would happen in this area and the public would not be informed so I sought assurance from the planning officer, the Council's regeneration manager and Peabody's development manager that only work by dint of the planning permission and conditions would occur. I got it via emails. But things are different enough now within the Exclusion Zones to raise reasonable concerns. I have the following examples. The reptile and sediment fencing to protect the slow worms, the Exclusion Zones and brook which the CEMP dictated to be in place prior to commencement has never been installed. Fencing for these Zones has occurred out of sequence. New fences have recently appeared that were scheduled for erection prior to commencement. Huge tree bows in the Spindleberry Zone have been cut down and logs stacked by the contractor. Not for ecological reasons or for safety but to make way for the new fence. They must have entered the Zone. An earth work has been constructed within this Exclusion Zone. I know what it is for but it's presence contradicts the access restrictions. Will the Member for Planning give a detailed explanation of how the continuing works and access to the Biodiversity Exclusion Zones conforms to the planning permission and conditions which can only be varied by written consent?

Response from Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning

Congratulations on the formation of the Friends of Spindleberry Nature Park – that is excellent news.

The Blackbird Leys redevelopment project will provide 294 new affordable homes, shops, green spaces and a new Community Centre for Blackbird Leys. The site does include part of Spindleberry Nature Park.

It is a difficult balance when we have over 3000 households on our waiting list for social housing, and homes are too expensive for most people to buy or rent, but we do recognise the importance of green space for mental and physical well-being and this is reflected in the council's Green Spaces Strategy.

Planning permission was given for this development, and from that point it is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that the development is brought forward according to the submitted plans and conditions. If a concern is raised with us, a member of the Enforcement team will visit the site to ensure work is being conducted appropriately. This has been the case on this site when issues have been raised previously - and our enforcement officers have visited. Thank you for bringing these additional concerns, our officers will now investigate the matters you have raised today, including the earthworks, and access to the Biodiversity Exclusion Zones, and will respond to you directly on the matter in a detailed manner.

2. Address from Chaka Artwell – Discrimination against non-internet users

Will Oxford City Elected Councillors, and ODS's stop the direct, and indirect discrimination against the 5,000 homes, who do not enjoy access to the internet, do not have a smartphone, and have never needed to use a QR code?

Oxford City Council's discrimination against cash users, and against people without access to the internet is an unlawful form of direct, and indirect discrimination.

For this Labour-led Council, which celebrate its Politically Correct, "diversity Inclusion and equality," (DIE) creed, why are the paid Councillors so tolerant of discrimination against cash users, and people without access to the internet?

As you are aware, the Governor of the Bank of England reports five million Subjects of His Majesty do not have current accounts, and use cash for transactions; which equates with 5,00 homes in Oxford.

It is completely illegal, and ethnically wrong for the elected Councillors to tolerate this discrimination.

The discrimination takes the form of people being unable to contact their Elected Councillors; who in the case of Barton, do not live on the estate, and do not have surgeries. As I have stood as a candidate in local elections, Barton people ask me for assistance for issues which ought to be address to the paid Councillor.

However, as many of these people are of senior years, and without access to the internet, they are effectively disenfranchised.

The whole ethos of Local Government Councillors is destroyed by Elected Councillors hiding behind the internet, as the only means of communication; communication which often does not even receive a reply.

Smart carparking meters discriminate. ODS has removed its public reception at Cowley Marsh and Horspath repair centre.

Post Office pay-point Council tax payers suffer discrimination as transaction are not instant, and summons have been issued as a result.

How MANY Council-Tax summons have been issued by the Council, to people using the slower cash pay point system?

Councillors being local, available, and accessible are the traditions of England's Protestant and Catholic people.

Will Oxford City Council require its publicly paid councillors to reveal their postal address for people without access to the internet; as claiming the Town Hall for communication does not work?

Will Oxford City Council investigate how many Council-tax summons has been issued to cash pay-point users?

Will Oxford City Council instruct ODS to re-open its public reception office at Cowley Marsh and Horspath?

Will Oxford City Council please mandate its paid Councillors to make publicly known when their surgeries are held-this is especially important when Councillors do not live in their elected area.

Will the Council require Councillors to reveal how many enquiries from the public, they have meaningfully responded too; as is courteous of paid Elected Councillors?

Will Oxford City Council require its Elected Councillors to reply to all who have contacted them, as one would expect of publicly paid Councillors?

Lastly, will Oxford City Council examine its policies, and prevent its policies from discriminating against cash users?

Response from Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies

I do not recognise the situation characterised in the address, and I certainly don't agree that our service offer is discriminatory. The City Council, through its Citizen Experience Strategy, seeks to ensure that no-one gets left behind.

We provide a range of ways to contact us to get support. You can see us in person, talk to us over the phone, and interact with us online. You can pay your bills in person, online and over the phone.

We continue to provide face to face and other assisted support and help the most vulnerable people to ensure their complex needs are met. We see about 450 people each month face-to-face. Services are available in the Westgate Library Monday, Wednesday and Friday and Officers are attending food larder sessions around the city to support residents with queries. Housing surgeries are held at the Westgate Library on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

We will do all we can to reduce digital exclusion by improving our citizens skills and access to technology. We have a Digital Cafe available in the Westgate library every month to help citizens with the use of digital technology.

Our contact centre is open Monday to Friday supporting a range of services from council tax, rents, benefits, planning, waste collection, housing repairs - each year we handle circa 180,000 calls as our trained Customer Service Officers offer support and guidance not just for our own services but signposting callers to partner organisations too. We also offer a web chat facility to help people engage with our digital channels. Customer satisfaction with our contact centre at 83% and face to face is at 97%.

There is a whole network of council officers that provide outreach -TMOs, TSOs, Community Health Development officers, to name but a few. And we provide grant

funding to enable local advice centres to thrive across the city, which means there is independent face to face support available in our communities.

With regard to payment methods, from the 63,430 households in the Oxford City Catchment area, approximately 2,300 council taxpayers choose to pay using AllPay at the Post Office or at a local shop.

Most customers who choose this option pay their council tax instalments on time, but a small number do not. Since the 1st of April 2024, persons using this payment method make up less than 1% of those summonsed for missing or overdue payments issued.

Direct Debit is favoured by a significant number of households as once the instruction has been set up, the customer does not need to worry about the logistics of paying each month. And Oxford City Council offers a choice of when to pay, so citizens know what date the payment will be taken, fitting it around the timing of their salary or wage coming in.

Online payments save time. People do not have to wait in lines, take time to write cheques, or wait for paper bills. Online payments also decrease the chances of overdue payments.

In summary, we continue to provide a real variety of ways for all the people in our city to interact with us. I believe we have a strong offer that recognises the diverse needs of individuals. We have diverse services to match those needs. I take pride that we still offer face-to-face services, and are out there proactively in communities, whilst being one of the most advanced councils in England when it comes to exploiting the digital revolution. And our citizens regularly rate us highly for doing this well, putting us in the top ten for council's surveyed – a very different story from the one painted in the address we have just heard.

3. Address from Georgie Steele – Support for Motion 13f (Protection of Carers from Exploitation)

I'm Georgie Steele, a carer and a theatremaker living with my family close to Oxford. I have two sons, now aged 19 and 17, who have a degenerative muscle-wasting condition DMD and are wheelchair users. They have limited use of their hands and cannot transfer, for example from their wheelchairs to a bed, without using a hoist. For the last ten years we have needed to employ carers for them, and increasingly as their condition advances and as they become adults, we their parents are not physically able to do their care, and it isn't appropriate that we should.

Over the last thirteen years we have been funded through Direct Payments for an increasing number of hours to pay for care. The problem has been finding carers, which has from the beginning been a time-consuming and demoralising struggle, as not many British people are willing to take up the job of being a carer. Despite our many efforts advertising locally and across Oxfordshire as well as online, we generally either couldn't find anyone or were let down by unreliable or unscrupulous people whom we had allowed into our home to do our children's personal care. (There were a few heroic exceptions!)

So we resorted to using various agencies to supply (generally) migrant carers. The agency carers were usually competent at caregiving, and were thoughtful and lovely people. However, they were often exhausted, late and needing to take time off due to illness, necessitating replacement carers being sent.

This was difficult for us as a family because if our sons' carers are late then that seriously affects our day as well, as when our older son was in the middle of doing his A levels and needed to be on time for school. Often we would have to step in and begin the care routine, and this meant we couldn't get to work on time. It is also difficult, time-consuming and distressing for our sons to have to explain the nuances of their personal care (which is highly complicated and individualised) to different, often exhausted, people every day.

What was even more distressing was discovering the reasons for the carers' lateness and absence. They were reluctant to explain why this was but we gradually understood that they were being systematically exploited, and were effectively indentured labourers. One carer told us how some days he needed to arrive for work at another client's (rural) home at 6am. Public transport was not available at that time or to that location but even so his sponsors refused to pay for a taxi but insisted that he got there himself. He then spent all his wages for that job paying for the taxi himself. Carers were often placed in poor housing with damp and infestations, and most of their earnings were taken to pay for this substandard accommodation. Many carers were sliding into destitution.

We wanted to challenge the agency about this but were repeatedly entreated by the carers not to say anything to their sponsors as they were terrified of losing their sponsorship. They had been told, don't complain about anything or we'll send you home.

Also, they know that if their sponsoring agency were to be investigated and then shut down, they would be in the position of having to find another sponsor.

Trying to find another sponsor would be an absurdly brief race against time, just 60 days. One of our carers found another sponsor but their existing agency refused to sign the papers to release him. If carers can't find a sponsor, they have to return home and face repaying an enormous debt of the money they borrowed in order to come here. (Sponsors charge them on average more than £10,000 as a recruitment fee).

Despite paying income tax and national insurance contributions, migrant care workers can't access most public funds. This means that if they're not given enough hours at work, if they're dismissed, or if they leave their job without another lined up, they're likely to struggle financially.

It is hard enough to leave your home and family and go to a foreign country, but then to experience such treatment as this is often goes near to breaking people. Many migrants here often slide into destitution. We saw one overworked and underpaid migrant carer who collapsed in the street and was taken to hospital, only to be told after one day that they must return to work, with no sick pay. This same person had reason to believe that they had a potentially life-threatening medical condition, but was not able to go to the GP because their sponsors refused them any time off.

So we have a badly-treated essential workforce on a constant verge of collapse, not able to provide reliable care for the most vulnerable people in our society. Not to deal with this is to leave yet another Social Care timebomb ticking: it's not just cruel, it's incredibly shortsighted and unwise.

So please can we improve visa conditions so migrant carers know they can find a better sponsor more easily if their current one exploits them?

It's a great privilege for me that migrant carers are prepared to leave their homes, their children and their own country, to come far

away to my home and help look after my children: it's a great shame on us all that they have to do so under such conditions.

Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working

Thank you for raising these important and concerning issues in your address and as you will see from recent news reports, this is playing out at a national level. Workers are coming to the UK to seek a better life, but some are being exploited. Many migrant care workers are unaware of the sponsorship process or their employment rights in the UK and are forced to work long hours for poor pay under the threat of sponsorship removal.

Oxford City Council has been working closely with the police, Oxfordshire County Council, NHS and other partners to prevent and respond to the issue at a local level. We understand that some migrant care workers face labour and financial exploitation, a fear of their employers and the threat of losing their sponsorship, poor and overcrowded accommodation and not being able to provide for the families they have left behind, all of which significantly impacts them physically and mentally. The partners having been raising awareness among care workers who are on Sponsored Visas and speaking with them addressing and alleviating the fears they have, informing them they have options and giving them practical and emotional support. We also undertake activities that disrupt those who exploit care workers.

We are also working with government departments and represent Oxfordshire partners on national forums who are driving for change to the Sponsorship scheme. We feel strongly that the scheme should never put a care worker in an exploitative situation, where they feel that it is a better option than leaving and falling into destitution and homelessness.

We are committed to support those affected so please encourage anyone you are concerned about or who knows of someone being exploited to contact the Anti-Slavery Coordinator confidentially:

*Nicola Bell
nbell@oxford.gov.uk
01865 252406*

4. Address from Sushila Dhall, Refugee Resource (deputised by David Waller) – Support for Motion 13b (Keep Campsfield Closed)

Refugee Resource stands in firm opposition to the re-opening of Campsfield Detention Centre. At Refugee Resource, we see the damage done to vulnerable people when they are imprisoned for indefinite periods having committed no crime, and having come to the UK seeking safety and sanctuary. Oxford City Council, being a Council of Sanctuary, continues to demonstrate a commitment to human rights and dignity; and strongly stating opposition to imprisoning people at Campsfield is part of upholding these values, which align with ours.

Immigration removal centres such as Campsfield, are well-documented sites of violence, hostility and degradation, with no place in a modern society that claims to respect human rights. Detention centres have long been sources of unnecessary harm, fear and trauma. As a trauma informed therapeutic organisation Refugee Resource has had to work with those affected by detention to help them heal after the damaging impacts of indefinite imprisonment and the threat of deportation to places where their human rights have been seriously breached, and from where they have fled, losing everything. Reopening Campsfield would represent a significant step backward for the UK's asylum system.

What the UK needs is not more detention, but humane reform of its asylum policies. This includes creating safe and legal routes for those fleeing persecution to

claim asylum in the UK. Instead of expanding detention units such as Campsfield, the government should focus on humane solutions that respect the dignity and rights of all individuals. Safe routes to the UK, a fair and open asylum system without long waits, sometimes for more than a decade, a phone line to caseworkers that does not involve long delays, and caring case worker interactions would form part of these much-needed reforms.

In addition, negative portrayals of asylum seekers, and policies that stigmatise and demonise asylum seekers only serve to deepen societal divisions and fuel the far-right. It is critical that we reject these harmful narratives and work toward a more inclusive, compassionate approach to migration.

In solidarity with Oxford City Council, Refugee Resource adds our voice to your call on the government to:

- Abandon its plans to reopen Campsfield.
- Take immediate steps to reduce the use of detention in the asylum process.
- Introduce more humane migration policies, starting with safe and legal routes to the UK for asylum seekers.

Refugee Resource reiterates its strong opposition to the reopening of Campsfield; urges the government to prioritise the protection of human rights over policies that perpetuate fear, harm and division.

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working provided a combined response to addresses related to keeping Campsfield closed which can be found under address number 6.

5. Address from Emma Jones, Asylum Welcome – Support for Motion 13b (Keep Campsfield Closed)

Yarl's Wood. Brook House. Harmondsworth. These names are notorious for a reason—immigration detention centres are synonymous with cruelty.

At Asylum Welcome, we stand with those impacted by the Hostile Environment, including the detention system. Our opposition to reopening Campsfield is evidence-based and shaped by our own experiences providing a visiting service there from 1993 to 2018.

Despite government claims, most detainees held at Campsfield will eventually be released into the community. Many will endure long periods of detention, even without a realistic prospect of deportation. Charlie Taylor, the chief inspector of prisons, revealed in a damning report earlier this year that around 60% of detainees at Harmondsworth were eventually released, and we have no reason to believe the new Campsfield will be any different.

Immigration detainees are not being held in punishment for a criminal offence and yet the system places overwhelming emphasis on confinement and security, with little focus on welfare. Detention centres are operated for profit by private companies, complaints of bullying and racism are rife, and healthcare services are often drastically under-resourced. We know that survivors of torture, trafficking, and sexual abuse are routinely detained, contrary to official guidance. Again, we have no reason to believe Campsfield will be different.

Legal representation becomes far more difficult within detention, leaving detainees even more isolated from justice. And unlike in any other European country, the UK has no time limit on detention, meaning people can be held indefinitely—sometimes for months or years—without knowing when they might be released. This is a shocking abuse of human rights, and – as I hope you will agree – contrary to everything we like to think of ourselves as a country.

Unsurprisingly, this leads to a cycle of trauma, self-harm, and tragically, suicide attempts. From January to May 2024, there were 285 incidents of self-harm across the UK's detention centres, meaning self-harm incidents occurred almost twice a day.

At Asylum Welcome, we believe in a compassionate, fairer approach. We welcomed the closure of Campsfield following the two Shaw Reviews, after which the then Conservative government appeared to accept that immigration detention must be drastically reduced. The Brook House Inquiry, published last year, exposed a “toxic culture” and “credible evidence” of breaches of human rights law and recommended widespread changes, including a 28-day time limit. We support community-based alternatives to detention that have been successfully piloted in recent years.

We urge you all to back the motion and to raise Oxford's voice to Keep Campsfield Closed. Thank you.

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working provided a combined response to addresses related to keeping Campsfield closed which can be found under address number 6.

6. Address from Bill MacKeith, CKCC – Support for Motion 13b (Keep Campsfield Closed)

Like other levels of local government, parish and county, the City has long had a policy of calling for the closure and opposing the reopening of Campsfield.

The adoption of the City of Sanctuary status has reinforced that position.

Behind the unnecessary suffering imposed on those detained by the policy, and the local opposition to detention from many parts of the local community, from trade unions to religious organisations, from student to human rights organisations, there is the question of national policy.

The only reason given by the previous government for the reopening of Campsfield, near Oxford and Haslar, near Portsmouth, immigration detention centres was a need for more detention places arising from the Rwanda flights plan. With the passing of that plan, there is absolutely no ‘need’ for them to be reopened.

Despite this, and despite no mention in the Labour manifesto of increasing detention, the incoming government has endorsed the plan to reopen Campfield and Haslar near Portsmouth saying this is in order to deport more people.

This is a failed policy and government should do better.

It is also the wrong response to the anti immigrant and anti Muslim riots.

The government should be opening up safe ways for asylum seekers to each he country, not taking lessons from right-wing leaders in other countries and macho talk of smashing the smugglers.

The Shaw reviews of the mid 20-teens and a broad movement in civic society resulted in the previous government adopting an immigration detention reform programme in

2016 to detain fewer people for shorter periods and to pursue community based alternatives to detention.

The very least we should do is call for from the new government is to revert to this reform programme, which indeed led to the closure of Campfield, Haslar and other detention centres.

Immigration detention is needlessly cruel as attested by the protest of detainees, the Brooke House inquiry report and the Panorama programme. Furthermore, 2/3 to 3/4 of detainees are released to live in the community. In the words of the Chief Inspector of UK Borders, it makes you wonder what the detentions were for in the first place.

Immigration detention is extremely expensive. The cost of running Campsfield and Haslar for six years would be £400,000,000 ([procurement notice September 2022](#)). This huge amount should be saved and spent elsewhere. This sum excludes the cost of new-build on both sites.

The argument that extra capacity is needed to deport more people is one that need to be challenged because what is called the detention estate is rarely anywhere near filled to capacity. The women's detention centre at Hassockfield in Durham for example has never been even half filled since it opened in 2018.

In the opinion of the UNHCR, alternatives to detention pilots have been shown to work, and the previous programme of 4 pilots should be continued. The possibility of Oxford hosting such a pilot should be pursued.

Campsfield, which used to be surrounded on 3 sides by open fields, now borders directly onto a new flagship Oxford university science park – not a good look – I would say incompatible - for a University laying claim to be a university of sanctuary.

A £70 million contract with Galliford Try to refurbish the old buildings for 160 residents is due to be completed by 24 December. The contract should be discontinued. The Home Office is well able to do this as demonstrated by the £60 million written off when the government recently cancelled the project to use RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire to house asylum seekers.

I commend the motion 'Keep Campsfield Closed' and urge you to vote for it.

Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working

As you will be aware, we have a motion on our Council agenda later on to discuss this very issue. I wanted to reassure you that we haven't waited for that motion to come to Council before restating this Council's very long-standing policy to keep Campsfield closed and to protest its opening.

On the 22nd of August, the day after the announcement was made, I wrote to the Home Secretary. I have today circulated that letter to all Council members. The response from the Home Office was a little disappointing as they didn't agree with our position.

We're grateful to all of the organisations that you represent for all the longstanding work that you do supporting Asylum Seekers in our city, specifically at Campsfield.

I'm really sorry that you are probably going to have to be doing that again – that is not the wish of this Council as we have had a longstanding campaign supports yours.

I specifically wrote and asked the Home Secretary to cancel the reopening of Campsfield House as a Detention Centre to create safe havens and more legal routes to apply for asylum in the UK to prioritise the prompt and fair processing of Asylum claims whilst introducing appropriate safeguards to allow Asylum Seekers to live and

work in our communities in the meantime, and to adequately fund local authorities to be able to support people seeking Sanctuary locally.

I'm very happy to make those two letters available to you so that you are fully apprised of both our letter to the Home Office and their response.

Thank you again for coming to address us today.