

**County Council
Tuesday, 12 September 2023**

Speeches

6. Petitions and Public Address (Pages 1 - 6)

Speeches by members of the public attached.

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Agenda Item 6

Zuhura Plummer

12 September 2023

Speech in favour of Cllr Hicks, motion 12

I am speaking in favour of Councillor Hicks motion today. Carrying out a feasibility study into the other ways of organising, governing or even owning our bus companies is clearly a useful task. We will gain solid knowledge of what is possible, what it would take, and what it might cost. Some might sneer about how it can never be done, how expensive and how impossible it is. Let the critics sneer, while we get on with a feasibility study – that will leave us with a costed shopping list and a set of thought-through options.

Buses are the workhorses of Oxfordshire. They are the way thousands of people get around our country – be that office workers on the 9-5, shift workers on early starts, Oxford's elderly getting to the doctors, or cheery revellers making friends at the back of the bus at 3am after a night out. And the poorest people in this city – where one in three households don't have access to a car - utterly rely on buses.

All bus journeys are important. But they are made harder – by traffic making them unreliable and slow, by a lack of joined up services, many confusing ticketing options or by routes which always force a change in the centre of town to cross our city. Even different brands give people who don't use them a sense of buses needing skills to navigate.

These problems *can* be solved – the traffic filters are about to make a *huge* difference to the speed and reliability of virtually all services which come into Oxford. The new route serving the eastern arc from the hospital to Littlemore is fantastic. And I heartily welcome the bus companies' investment in 159 new electric buses. All these huge wins have come about as a direct result of the traffic filters plan. And my goodness, do I support the County talking about this more! Communicating and explaining this to our communities!

But the wider issues of investment, integration, routes and liveries remains. And all of these could be significantly improved with public franchising or a public transport body. Reading Buses, which is municipally owned, can invest an additional £3 million a year in the bus network because it has no private shareholders.

Any of the options in the motion will be costly, I'm aware of that. But there may be time, in intermediate future, when the County has a decent source of regular income, ringfenced for transport. Whatever this spent on, it needs to be popular and easily understood by the people of Oxfordshire. And boy, is public control of public transport understandable and popular. Polls consistently show 70% or more approval for public ownership or control of buses, with Conservative voters polling only marginally lower, in the low 60s.

And the opportunities are opening at a national level. I pray daily for a change of government at Westminster, as I think many in this country do, and soon our prayers may be answered. Labour's Shadow Secretary of State has indicated that making it easier for bus companies to come under public control or ownership is a priority, so let's be ready to seize that opportunity when it comes.

If we never look at what is possible, it will remain impossible. But if we commit to this feasibility study we at least be ready to take advantage of new income streams, or new opportunities when they arrive.

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Dear council members,

as a son of a Holocaust survivor - a Jewish refugee, as an international refugee law academic, and as a resident of Oxfordshire, I support Cllr Gant's refugee protection motion.

'Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries freedom from persecution', says Article 14 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. But how CAN you get safely and legally to other countries? Well, if you are British, your passport gives you visa-free access on arrival to 132 countries, and nearly all other countries will grant you a visa on application. The same is not true if you are Iraqi, Iranian, or Syrian.

Indeed virtually all persons applying for asylum in the UK had to enter it irregularly – smuggled in lorries, crossing the channel in small boats, or using forged documentation to obtain visas. Ask yourself: why would a young Eritrean fearing indefinite military service under conditions of servitude in the world's second-most unfree country after North Korea pay thousands of pounds to malevolent traffickers, risking their lives by travelling in unseaworthy boats to come from Calais to the UK, rather than board a Eurostar for £50? The answer is clear: if they attempted to use their national documents, they will be denied a visa and boarding. They literally have no safe and legal routes to get here. Indeed, except for the special schemes for Ukrainians and for Hong Kong, no one does.

The illegal migration Act amounts to an asylum ban; it extinguishes the right to seek protection in the UK for those who arrive irregularly no matter how genuine and compelling their claim may be, and with no consideration of their individual circumstances. Egregiously, it disqualifies even modern slavery victims, which the former PM May's legislation sought to protect.

Denying access to asylum on this basis undermines the very purpose for which the Refugee Convention was established and indeed manifestly breaches it – as UNHCR clearly stated after its passage. The Act will inevitably leave asylum-seekers with inadmissible claims in limbo, waiting for the government to negotiate 'return' agreements with countries they have never been to, to which they have no connections, and which may not offer them protection.

The motion rightly calls the council to sign the national 'Fight the Anti-Refugee Laws' pledge, urges the government to repeal the *illegal* illegal migration Act and, most critically, to lobby against central Government plans to build or repurpose facilities in Oxfordshire to detain or warehouse seekers of sanctuary.

Please support it this afternoon.

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Speech to OCC , Tuesday 12 th September , Mark Goldring, Director, Asylum Welcome

Seeking sanctuary in Oxfordshire

When I spoke to you 2 years ago, I urged the County to be more proactive in supporting refugees and asylum seekers;-to better engage with people with lived experience and with civil society to make our county a safe and positive place for sanctuary seekers in an ever more hostile national context.

Since then we have had thousands of arrivals on official resettlement schemes, from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine. They have, by and large, been well supported. You, and other councils have significantly strengthened your teams and your staff have stepped up.

All credit: But this improvement is very much focussed on councils collaborating with government and each other, usually on official resettlement programmes. These aren't open to most people fleeing persecution across the world.

What we aren't yet doing locally is taking a holistic look at the lives and needs of these asylum seekers, people often fleeing violence in their own and now vulnerable members of our community. Especially with the growing Home Office backlog, and the ever more challenging national context, they are likely to be in limbo in our county for years.

Oxfordshire has about 600 asylum seekers in four hotels, as well as increasing numbers being housed in every district awaiting an outcome on their asylum claim. They include many Afghans not lucky enough to get on the 2021 flights. Most of their applications will eventually be approved so many are likely to settle locally.

The support that they receive is cause for concern; not able to work or find their own housing, with poor quality food, sometimes unhygienic conditions and little to do, often being moved at short notice, - ten local hotel residents recently received 24 hour notice of transfer to the Bibby Stockholm, postponed only because of health problems on the barge - one of our Burmese, Kassam clients and was due to join on this platform today, but yesterday received such a transfer letter and feels too upset to speak.

The plan to open an immigration detention centre at Campsfield, next year will add an extra set of injustices, the incarceration of people who have committed no offence but to seek sanctuary.

We should and we can do better. We will do so by challenging these developments. And by listening closely to sanctuary seekers and considering how locally we might better respond to their needs.

We will do better by working with the voluntary sector; the council is so far neither realising its potential of nor supporting it effectively. The Local Authorities of Sanctuary scheme, that you are being encouraged to explore in the resolution later today is a really positive, systematic and realistic way of developing a plan for this.

I hope that you will support it.

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