

Sharone Parnes

Comments at WODC, full-Council meeting of 23rd January 2019.

Hello. I'm Sharone Parnes. I'm a West Oxfordshire resident, an elected Town Councillor and a Jew (...not necessarily in that order).

This Sunday, January 27th, is Holocaust Memorial Day in the UK. It's an occasion to remember not only the millions murdered during the Holocaust but also subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust notes on its website: "We're fortunate here in the UK; we are not at immediate risk of genocide. However, discrimination has not ended, nor has the use of the language of hatred or exclusion. There is still much to do to create a safer future ..."

Perhaps more directly relevant to Members in this room, one of its Officers explains: "Local authorities act as champions for their communities and have an essential role to play in uniting, safeguarding and educating their constituents."

The HMD Trust is not a Jewish organization; but it has played an active role in the UK delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), and has endorsed the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism.

In January 2017, the Rt Hon Sajid Javid (then- Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) wrote to all Council Leaders. He informed that in the previous month, the Government formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of anti-Semitism; the first European Union country to do so! The definition – he said – although legally non-binding is ***an important tool for public bodies*** to understand how anti-Semitism manifests itself in the 21st century, as it gives examples of the kind of behaviours which depending on the circumstances could constitute anti- Semitism.

He concluded: "We are well aware that anti-Semitism continues to be a problem in this country. It is therefore right that, as a Government, we are able to demonstrate the seriousness with which we take it, as for all forms of hate crime. Anti-Semitism must be understood for what it is – an attack on the identity of people who live, contribute and are valued in our society. In light of this, I would like to take this opportunity to ***strongly encourage you to formally adopt the definition and consider its application in your own authority.***"

That definition has been adopted by a growing number of Councils, often with motions leading to fascinating and moving speeches by respective Members. But in Oxfordshire it's a somewhat different story.

In October 2017, Cherwell District Councillors **unanimously** voted in favour of formally adopting the world-recognised IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. No other Oxfordshire County, District or City Councils have done so until July (after the City Council was reminded and asked about of Secretary Javid's letter). The Leader there bravely and commendably formally announced acceptance of the definition, but there was no open debate or Council Resolution there - and it remains open to interpretation as to why.

On October 8th, Witney Town Council formally Resolved "RESOLVED: that the full IHRA definition of anti-Semitism be circulated to all members and that the adoption be considered at the next Full Council meeting." But their 10th of December Agenda made no mention of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism - and it remains open to interpretation as to why. Incidentally, on the same date (10th December) publication of a European Commission survey painted a bleak picture of the situation in the UK.

This Council, like the vast majority of Oxfordshire's District and County Councils have not considered, in open session, adoption of the IHRA definition to anti-Semitism and it remains open to interpretation as to why.

There is much more, to say and think about, than time will allow this afternoon. But what is fundamentally clear is that the time has come for West Oxfordshire District Council to openly consider adoption of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, and to do so without further delay.

Thank you.