

Address by Nigel Gibson, Head Petitioner, in support of a Petition to Oxford City Council, February 2013

The Labour-controlled City Council's decision to close Temple Cowley Pools and Fitness Centre, blatantly ignoring the wishes of the people of Oxford, and in so doing deliberately removing publicly funded facilities from thousands of people inside the ring road in East Oxford, remains the biggest single issue in the city, even after three years of campaigning. These facilities offer so many people the opportunity to exercise and maintain and improve their quality of life, in a place where they want to do it.

A petition with over 1,500 signatures forces the Labour councillors, clearly on the basis of previous debates against their will, to face up to what they have done on behalf of vested interests. These vested interests include selling off the Temple Cowley site for student accommodation, ultimately for Oxford Brookes University, and improving the profits of Fusion Leisure, operators of the Council's leisure facilities, by getting rid of over thirty jobs.

The first petition, over 12,000 signatures, was simply ignored by the Labour councillors, who poured scorn on it. Since then we have regularly collected signatures for a series of petitions, the one being presented this evening being the sixth. All told, over 20,000 signatures.

The topic for this petition was inspired by a remark made by a LibDem councillor when the last petition was debated. He suggested that getting round a table and discussing things would be a good idea; and we agree. Doing that in the first place would have saved a lot of time and money. We've been trying to do that since the start of the Campaign, but the Council don't want that to happen because they would have to admit the information that supports their case for closure is a combination of misleading, inaccurate, incomplete and untrue, something we have demonstrated time and again.

The other reason for discussing this issue openly and transparently is simply because THINGS HAVE CHANGED since the Council made their decision.

The costs have spiralled from an estimate of £3m, then £4.5m, then £5.5m, through to £6.5m ('definitely a maximum figure'), then £9.2m, over £11m and if you include additional supporting costs over £13m....

The demographics have changed. At one time the proposed new swimming pool would have been at the centre of a diamond of housing, as the last Labour government intended concreting over the green space between Abingdon and South Oxford. The latest Census figures reveal that the highest population growth over the last ten years has been in Cowley Marsh, where Temple Cowley Pools and Fitness Centre is situated - an increase of 41%, and big increases as a whole across East Oxford within the ring road. And housing in this area continues to increase. Previously the Blackbird Leys population had been the big number, but not any more - the area

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around Temple Cowley now has at least that number of residents, and it is in a place where we know people want to use it. In contrast, Blackbird Leys has grown very little in ten years, and there is absolutely no information on how many people there would actually make any use at all of a new swimming pool on their doorstep. The Council has not dared actually ask the questions that would establish what demand there is for a new swimming pool, or whereabouts in the City this would come from. That's because they know the answer already, and it wouldn't justify closing both Temple Cowley Pools and the existing Blackbird Leys swimming pools, each of which has a different intended group of users. And Labour has consistently 'found' demand only by knocking on doors and giving their version of what they thought happened. We've not on those same doors and found that support for the pool was given based on misinformation. The Council repeats the same mantra, that the proposed new swimming pool is a 'citywide facility', but with nothing that justifies its statements.

The political climate has changed; there are heavy curbs on local government spending, and an investment of this size, when there is a much better value alternative, must surely be constantly questioned?

When there are major changes in circumstances such as these, a local authority, in this case Oxford City Council, has a legal obligation to review its decision. So the petition gives the Council, and Labour, the opportunity to do just that.

The petition reads as follows:

"We call on Oxford City Council to enable Council officers and members of the Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign to hold a series of meetings where they can discuss, identify and clarify areas of common understanding based on a full, open and transparent exchange of information. These meetings should be apolitical, jointly chaired, open to the public and develop a consensus so that we can agree a way forward that will benefit the people of Oxford"

More than 20,000 people have signed our petitions and asked the Council to think again. The Campaign continues because of this huge and continuing support across Oxford and beyond, while the Labour-controlled Council seems determined to ignore the views of so many thousands of people. For more information email savetcp@gmail.com and visit the Campaign website <http://tiny.cc/savetcp>.