

OXFORD CITY FULL COUNCIL MEETING 13 APRIL 2015

AGENDA ITEM 17: PUBLIC ADDRESSES AND QUESTIONS THAT DO NOT RELATE TO MATTERS FOR DECISION AT THIS COUNCIL MEETING.

Addresses

(1) Address by Jane Alexander

(2) Address by Nigel Gibson, www.savetemplecowleypools.web.com
Openness and transparency in Oxford City Council

(3) Address by Chaka Artwell, resident of Oxford, OX3 8BW (redacted until after the election)

Questions

Question from Sarah Lasenby

(1) Address by Jane Alexander

Today I would like to draw your attention to the experience of just a few people and how they have been affected by the closure of Temple Cowley Pools.

From a parent with a young daughter:

I learnt to swim at Temple Cowley pool 35 years ago and my daughter started to learn to swim there when she was 4 months old, we used to go to lessons every Friday at TCP. We live walking distance from Temple Cowley pool; the new pool at Blackbird Leys is miles from us so we have to drive and there is often not enough parking at the new centre.

The Ducklings swimming session at the Leys pool is the same price for half as long (30 minutes instead of 60) as it was at TCP.

There are not enough swimming lessons and public/general swim sessions since 2 pools (the old Blackbird Leys pool and Temple Cowley) were closed, to be replaced with only one. It's right that BL pool is to public for school swimming sessions, it's vital that children learn to swim, but that's why we need two pools in East Oxford, so that there are still enough public sessions. Exercise classes at the Leys leisure centre are now hugely overbooked, as there are two centres' worth of people being forced against their will to fit into one.

I'm worried about a woman with a chronic neurological illness who used to swim at Temple Cowley. She didn't have a car so wouldn't be able to get to BBL as her condition wouldn't allow her to walk as far as the (two buses each way) journey would require, also it would be too expensive for her.

In this day and age when illness and obesity is such a problem, removing an exercise facility in walking distance for so many people is extremely illadvised.

There is still massive public support for Temple Cowley pool and gym, as the recent poll in the Oxford Mail showed, with 92% in favour of re-opening the centre.

From someone in your 'elderly' target group:

I am so grateful that you are continuing the fight against the closure of Temple Cowley Pool. On a personal note, since being unable to do my weekly swim at Temple Cowley (the other pools on offer are too far from my home to enable me to use them), my physical health has deteriorated considerably. This is what was expected; swimming is the only form of exercise that a partially disabled person can do. I am now deprived of it by Councillors who have little idea of the health benefits. They should also realise that they have completely lost my vote. I will be contributing to your fighting fund and again thank you so much for your attempts at helping.

My own experience is that I could not swim and use pool exercise classes as I had before TCP closure. I used to exercise/swim 3 times a week. After TCP closed I found BL not open at similar times, my class was now held in the evening and not in the swimming pool but the shallow learner pool! We who choose to water based exercise do it because we need the buoyancy of the water to support us, not have half our bodies out of the water! It did not work for any of us. We are being sold short.

Swimming time for public severely is reduced by schools occupying half the pool and the other half being 'ALL DEEP END'. Nowhere to stand and rest when necessary at the end of a length. Makes swimming impossible for many, especially those with health issues.

The opening times to public severely reduced. No steps were available into the pool, even though we were told it was all ready for the public weeks earlier.

In the first 5 weeks post TCP closure, I had only managed to swim 7 times total using Ferry, BL and Barton.

My body had become stiffer than before. When I lost my balance whilst crossing the Cowley Rd on 4 Feb I was not agile enough to regain my balance. I smashed into the kerb and suffered 5 fractures. This is not only painful but has limited my ability to exercise even further. Had TCP been open I would be there as often as I could, doing exercise and trying to proactively look after myself. I realise of course that health and fitness facilities are not in a particular location for just one person, but my experience is typical of the emails the Campaign to Save Temple Cowley Pools has been receiving.

At the CEB meeting last week there was a lot of self-praise between officers and councillors for the numbers of people using Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre, and the waiting lists for classes. This surely shows the need for more, not fewer pools and gyms especially when you haven't even asked the people what WE want! Oxford Mail has asked, and this week sees 92% voting to want to keep TCP. With this from our local press, isn't it time the council allow the people in the form of SaveTCPcic, to take over and run Temple Cowley Pools and Fitness Centre for the good of all?

(4) Address by Nigel Gibson, www.savetemplecowleypools.web.com

Openness and transparency in Oxford City Council

My address this evening is about openness and responsiveness within Oxford City Council, and the way you try and portray yourself, in a way that is so different from how the public views you. Operating in your own insulated bubble is not the way an organisation should behave, as you become more and more detached from the people you are here to serve. I've spoken about this before at Council, pointing out your self-aggrandisement. In response then, a councillor misinterpreted what I was talking about and defended the aims of individual councillors. That wasn't my point.

The self-aggrandisement I was referring to was the Council's usual approach of spinning everything to show itself in the best light, not any particular individual councillor – it would take far more than my five minutes this evening to cover those I could mention.

You have recently approved another version of your Corporate Strategy – a fine tome no doubt for what is, after all, a district council. Within it, you talk proudly of the MJ Award for Highest Achieving Council of 2014, describing it as a “crowning achievement of the year”. You go on to say:

“Referencing the awards that we have received should not be mistaken for self-congratulation or complacency. We hope that the external recognition that the Council is receiving will give the people of Oxford confidence that the Council's high aspirations for the city in difficult times are matched by its capacity and capability to deliver high quality results.”

The impression given in the plan, and indeed from all the publicity put out by the Council, is that it is a very prestigious award, implicitly independently judged from third party recommendations.

Indeed. But how many of you actually know anything of the award process itself. Did you know that the judges are all senior executives from other local authorities; no members of the public, or anyone not associated in some way with a local authority.

The candidates for the awards are self-selecting, making their own submissions. Given the way in which the Council has been challenged over recent times, particularly about not listening to the public you are here to serve on so many issues – Temple Cowley Pools is the most obvious one, but there are many others – Northern Gateway, Westgate redevelopment, the Barns Road community centre, Barton West, I don't believe that you would find many members of the public suggesting you should get an award for “High Achieving”.

So I was very interested in what was in the submission that presented such a compelling and rose-tinted view that elevated the Council's performance above all others. I keep being told that you operate with openness and transparency, so I naturally searched the website. No sign of anything there. I had to look (and dig a bit) on the Municipal Journal website itself, to get this 9 page document, apparently prepared by Peter Sloman and Bob Price. I have to say that reading it was a revelation, I hadn't realised what a wonderful job the Council has done for the people you are here to serve. No balance, no mention of any controversy, no mention of the thousands of people feeling abandoned in the Cowley area who protested long and hard that they wanted to keep their health and fitness facilities, or how the community of users at Temple Cowley Pools is no longer – they have written to

the Campaign, expressing their sadness at the loss of their social network. I recall the phrase the Campaign to Save Temple Cowley Pools adopted regarding all the Council's pronouncements on why Temple Cowley Pools should be closed - Inaccurate, Incomplete, Misleading and Untrue. Having said all that, you manage to let yourselves down from the start – the front page repeats your oft-repeated but never substantiated mantra of “World Class City for Everyone” – but manage to mis-spell “World” – such lack of attention to detail is simply embarrassing, not high achieving. And of course the award is for “Best Achieving”, not “Highest Achieving”.

So, this is what I call self-aggrandisement – using an award that you put yourselves forward for, in your Corporate Plan, to try and improve your reputation. And then you simply can't be bothered to check spelling or get the award's description correct.

Another really good example of self-aggrandisement was on show recently, at the City Executive Board. Now, the vast majority of people will never see a CEB meeting; held at one of the most inconvenient times of the day, 5pm, and having changed the constitution several times to reduce the public input to handing out answers to questions before the meetings, there really is no incentive for anyone to come and watch. But now everyone has the opportunity – cameras are allowed in, albeit grudgingly and only with the force of law. Everyone now has the opportunity to see the CEB in inaction – no debate, no criticism (constructive or otherwise), no challenge – you have to wonder why they bother having them at all, and that is certainly the way they seem to be conducted. You can see an example for yourself, at this web address <http://bit.ly/1aeM8uP>

The particular event on camera in the meeting was the approval of the Fusion Lifestyle Annual Service Plan, a glossy leaflet put out each year to tell us all how wonderfully the partnership with Fusion is running our remaining leisure centres. There were a couple of causes for particular ‘celebration’ during the discussion – overall, a council officer felt it had been a “good year” – no reference to Temple Cowley Pools, or the adverse feedback over the closure – and there seems to be a pride taken in announcing the approval ratings of over 95%, when at Scrutiny last year, and in the answers to CEB questions, it was admitted that the way these ratings are produced are not clearly and fully explained to readers of the document. – there are many, many people who would disagree with that council officer. The other celebration moment came from the Fusion manager, who announced that there were waiting lists for classes, so that was a very good thing and showed how popular everything was – there were signs at this point that the whole CEB was going to erupt in a standing ovation.

Ignored, of course, was the fact that you, clearly against the wishes of the people, have closed down two facilities – so it's not really surprising that you have waiting lists, and if you are on a waiting list that is certainly not a cause for celebration. And those waiting lists include children waiting to learn to swim. The demand is there for more facilities – keeping Temple Cowley Pools open would address that demand.

So, in conclusion, I stand by what I have said previously, that this council, a mere district council, continues to be guilty of self-aggrandisement. I, and most of the public, are keen to celebrate what you do right – but it's what you do right in the eyes of the people you are here to serve that matters, not what you think makes you look better. Listen to what the public are telling you, and act on that in their best interests, not yours.

(3) Address by Chaka Artwell, resident of Oxford, OX3 8BW

This address is redacted until after the election on 7 May.

Questions

Question from Sarah Lasenby

I have been told from various sources that the Oxford Swimming Club is using both Ferry and Barton pools for training and that people have been turning up only to find they can't swim. Why is this? Was it not the plan that the Leys Pool would be the pool for the club to use to replace Temple Cowley Pool? What can you do to prevent people making pointless journeys to Ferry and Barton for their swimming? Can the Club be asked to use the Leys Pool? but in any case can some effective time tabling be put in place to show at least a week in advance when the pools are available to the public?

To leave things as they are is to penalise the poorer people who can't afford to waste money on useless bus journeys. How many people have stopped swimming because they can't afford the time or the money to get to the Leys Pool? It should be possible to get this figure by deducting those who are not attending the new pool from those who were passed over to the Leys from Temple Cowley.

Response from Councillor Rowley, Board Member for Leisure contract and community partnership grants

The City of Oxford Swimming Club formerly used Ferry, Barton and Temple Cowley pools for their training and it now uses Ferry, Barton and the Leys Pools and Leisure Centre; in fact, the pool replacement has allowed them to reduce their hours at Ferry. The timetable for all our pools and exercise classes is published in advance and users can find a live timetable on the website for each facility; but in any case there would only be a change if an exceptional circumstance made it necessary.

The Leys Pools and Leisure Centre has had 161,571 visitors in its first three months, almost as many as Temple Cowley Pools did in the whole of the last year. I am sorry if anyone has been put off visiting our leisure facilities by the necessary replacement of the pool, but it has enabled many thousands more people to enjoy leisure and keep fit. All Oxford's people now have first-rate, affordable public facilities which are financially and environmentally sustainable and will remain so into the long-term future.

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