

CLOSING TEMPLE COWLEY POOLS – THE CONSEQUENCES

I am speaking to Council this evening in my capacity as Director of the community interest company, set up to take over the operation, at no cost to the Council and taxpayers, of Temple Cowley Pools and Fitness Centre. In stark contrast to many other Labour controlled councils up and down the country, the Labour controlled Oxford City Council decided in December 2014 that they weren't interested in letting the community deliver the health and fitness facilities that we want and need, where we want and need them. Instead, you opted for a payment of £3.6m from Catalyst Housing in return for granting them planning permission for housing that is twice your permitted density. Obviously no conflict of interest there.

Catalyst are now intent, they say under your instruction, on destroying a perfectly sound building before even submitting a Planning Application. This makes absolutely no sense, if you really care about the community for which you are supposedly responsible for looking after. This is a building that is listed as an Asset of Community Value, recognised as such by the Council, and clearly a facility that the community feels can be run for their benefit.

What is this facility that we are talking about? Temple Cowley Pools was rebuilt in 1986, designed with a lifespan, if properly maintained, of over 50 years. It is a rare example of what at the time was a revolutionary design. As well as the 25m competition swimming pool, the sauna and steam suite, the gym and exercise studio, Temple Cowley Pools had the only publicly funded diving pool in the whole county. And because it is self-contained with a range of facilities, could easily be used for womens-only evenings. You, against widespread public opposition, closed this facility in December 2014.

We predicted the consequences of closure – elderly and infirm would suffer increased isolation and reduction in health, a reduction in fitness of the population as they exercise less frequently or not at all, increased carbon emissions as people in the area are forced to drive somewhere else, and an increase in crime. All of these things have happened over the last year, and of course remain unreported by you as you pursue your 'good news' culture.

We demonstrated this clearly with the Blue Hole, the area in which people, as a result of your actions in closing Temple Cowley Pools, now have to travel more than 15 minutes to get to where they want to exercise. Independent research shows unequivocally that if people are forced to travel more than 15 minutes, they don't go as frequently, or at all.

You recently endorsed this in your Leisure Strategy for the next five years, apparently a strategy that you feel is "world class", where you identified areas of Oxford that were more than 20 minutes' walk away from a swimming pool. And in approving your strategy you pronounced yourselves content that people should have to walk so far if they want to swim. I had naively assumed that in developing your strategy you would have the evidence and figures to support – so I asked how many people are affected by this. I should not have been surprised that you don't hold that information. You have determined through your strategy for the next five years that it is perfectly ok for an unknown number of the people, those you are elected to serve and for whom you are responsible for providing health and fitness facilities, to have to travel beyond where they should. And these are people from whom you have taken away a facility, knowingly, actively and deliberately removed their ability to exercise locally. And providing a new gym, at over £500,000, is not a replacement - you can't swim in a gym.

As you haven't worked out how many people are affected by your strategy, we have – working with figures from the council's statistician, over 40,000 of your citizens are no longer able to conveniently access the health and fitness facilities they want – not one of them asked you to take these facilities

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away, and despite the people clearly wanting Temple Cowley Pools kept open, and despite there being absolutely no evidence that the building was falling down or actually needed to close, you went ahead and took a political decision in 2009 – Labour in Oxford decided that Temple Cowley Pools would close – for no good reason other than you felt it was politically expedient.

We also asked you to track what the people who used to use Temple Cowley Pools are doing now – you have refused to do that, saying repeatedly that most of them transferred to the new pool at Blackbird Leys. Well, what actually happened was that without anyone's consent, when you closed Temple Cowley Pools you simply moved the database from Temple Cowley to Blackbird Leys – that is not the same as people actually using it. And where you are registered has no bearing on what public facilities you actually use. You obviously have no interest in finding out what people are doing now – as the community interest company, we exist to help the community, so we asked them. Our survey, backed up by many discussions, shows clearly that people are either not going anywhere else, or are not going as frequently. So, the general health of the area is going down (so inevitably placing more of a burden on social services and the NHS), you are not meeting your own measures for target groups exercising, and worse still, as predicted, the crime rate in the area has also gone up. Did you really want all of this to happen? The answer could have been really simple – work with the community, let us take it over and if we made it work then everyone would benefit. Sadly, your different course of action has led to these consequences, which you cannot by any measure call “world class”, and for which you as a Council are completely responsible.

But, you say, the property is sold so nothing to do with the Council. Well, in five years of challenging the Council on everything you have said about Temple Cowley Pools, I have clearly demonstrated that everything you have said is a combination of inaccurate, incomplete, misleading and untrue. And in this case you haven't failed to disappoint me, yet again. The site still belongs to you, the Council, and you are in control of anything that happens there – the sale will only go through if you grant a planning application – one that hasn't even been submitted yet, let alone approved. And there are extremely good grounds for refusal.

It doesn't make sense to anyone to demolish an Asset of Community Value before planning permission for the proposed replacement is granted. Catalyst have clearly said that you, the Council, are responsible for the timing of the demolition. Labour remains responsible for the fate of Temple Cowley Pools; and whether or not you demolish the building, the Blue Hole will still exist – and our campaign, the community campaign, will carry on as long as necessary to enable people in the area to have the health and fitness facilities they want and need, where they want and need them.

As a council, council officers and councillors alike, you hold in trust the assets of this city on behalf of the public, with a duty to provide services that the public want and need, where they want and need them. It is surely only reasonable that you support the community as much as possible, and give us every chance, if we are prepared to operate a facility that you feel unable to. To that end I am asking you this evening to instruct Catalyst immediately to stop what they are doing and wait until after planning permission has been finally approved.

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www.savetemplecowleypools.webs.com