

Address to Council from Ian Smith – Chair of City of Oxford Swimming Club

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Ian Smith and I am here in my capacity as Chair of City of Oxford Swimming Club to explain the necessity for the new swimming pool at Blackbird Leys to progress.

We have heard much over the past 3 years regarding delays due to legal objections to the project and I firmly believe that the Council should now hear some alternative to the views that have been so widely publicized.

The council now needs to understand that these delays are starting to put the very future of the Club, and the quality of swimming provision in Oxford, at risk.

Considering that there has been an Oxford Swimming Club since 1909 it would be an absolute tragedy if we had to move elsewhere or even folded. It would be an even greater tragedy if swimming provision was affected, reducing the ability of the public to partake and opportunities for children to learn to swim.

At a time when a large number of swimming clubs are experiencing problems the Club is currently growing and becoming more successful. This time last year there was a total of 296 swimmers and 202 Associate members. To date this year we have a total 344 swimmers, an increase of 16%. This has been achieved through the hard work of volunteers, giving their own time to promote swimming (both as a sport and a past time).

I state these figures as it is worth noting that the Club is many times the combined size of the Save Temple Cowley group and the Blackbird Leys group.

We are an inclusive Club and our swimmers cover a large age range, we have 7 year olds entering our Academy squads whilst we have swimmers aged 18 to 70 plus in our very successful Masters Squad. Our disability swimmers have in the past included Danielle Watts – Para Olympian and currently include Rosie Bancroft who is on the Road to Rio programme. Additionally, we are the disability hub club for Oxfordshire which means that if people with disabilities wish to take up swimming, they come through us and we assist at schools and through the club with a wide range of swimmers who have learning as well as physical disabilities.

COSC is also not just about competitive swimming. Many of the swimming teachers in Oxford and the surrounding area have connections past and present with COSC (COSC used to run the council's learn to swim programme). Our Head Coach also helps with schools learn to swim in a voluntary capacity.

We further support schools swimming by running Primary School and Secondary School Galas in cooperation with Oxford Sports Partnership and also assist Fusion with their Swim Fit programme.

As a Club we rely on having a competition pool (8 lanes 25m with spectator seating) to hold our events and raise funds and we would not be viable without such a facility. After all, where would a football club be without a football pitch?

We also currently rely on Temple Cowley pool heavily for our training using upwards of 110 lane hours per week and spending a large amount of money in the process. Pool time is in short supply and closure without a replacement would be devastating.

Our concerns would not be so great should recent experiences not have led us to believe that Temple Cowley's functional lifespan is severely limited. Whilst the building is still open the pool is rapidly becoming unsuitable for use and we have been forced to cancel a number of training sessions.

Opposition to the Blackbird Leys plan, whilst vociferous, originates from a small number of people with a great desire to protest but with little interest or involvement in swimming (certainly at Temple Cowley).

Whilst well organized, their arguments are disjointed and sometimes hypocritical with their leaders:

- Campaigning that swimming provision should stay within the ring road, whilst using Barton pool.
- Decrying the Blackbird Leys project as too expensive, whilst saying that their preferred option would be a new build at Cowley Marsh (which would cost more).
- Not using the facility or only visiting Temple Cowley for a convenient gym visit when there's a photo shoot.
- Encouraging the Blackbird Leys Town Green campaign and saying that the swimming club are 'elitist' whilst conducting a 'campaign of snobbery' regarding the reasoning for not wanting the move to Blackbird Leys to go ahead.
- Misleading people who sign their petitions. Initially some of our members even signed the petition not realizing that this related to the closure of Temple Cowley and a move to a new pool (which was often conveniently omitted from the request).

Having read their blog I am puzzled what the group's real motivation is. A desire for a greater involvement in local politics perhaps? Or aiming for revenge in a well-publicized dispute with a local politician?

It certainly has nothing to do with future leisure provision for the City!

The group claim that a full refurbishment could be achieved for £3m. They don't say how they arrived at this figure, what it would achieve, but do say it would last for 25 years?

Meanwhile:

- The City Council
- The County Council
- COSC
- Two High Court judges
- Fusion Lifestyle
- The ASA (who's raison d'être is to encourage and facilitate participation in swimming!)

All say that the Blackbird Leys plan is sound, just and should proceed.

Let us be honest here! Temple Cowley is a 1930's building, and not one of particular architectural interest!

The current pool perches rather precariously on the previous incarnation and is frankly past its sell by date. Large amounts of money will be required over the next few years to keep it functional.

The City needs to move forward with the development of leisure provision and has put plans in place to do so.

The tragedy is that a small, well motivated, but ultimately misguided group has been able to delay the development for 18 months.

Sadly, this has brought things to a crisis point and benefited no one except lawyers.

I therefore implore Oxford City Council (on behalf of the swimming community (present and future) who actually use Temple Cowley pool!) to proceed with building its replacement without haste, before we are left without a pool at all!

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