

Oxford City Council Must Engage with the East Oxford Community

Much has happened since I addressed Council on the last occasion the public was permitted to entertain you. We've had another local council election, and some councillors have left, some new ones have arrived and some of you I see still remain. I thought you would all like either an update on the Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign, or an introduction. And, on behalf of the people in the community of East Oxford, I have a request for all councillors.

So, for those just joining, the least you need to know. Temple Cowley Pools and Gym is classed as a 'wet/dry' leisure centre; it is not just a swimming pool. It has a 25m competition swimming pool, but also a diving pool, a learner pool, a steam room and sauna suite, an exercise studio and a gymnasium. You, Oxford City Council, have decided that you wish to close it, and build what is only a 25m swimming pool in Blackbird Leys – you call this a replacement – we, all non-Labour supporters (and even lately some Labour ones), recognise that it is not.

You've said that Temple Cowley Pools is too costly to run, that its carbon emissions are too high, that it is old and at "risk of catastrophic failure". We have, over the last five years, demonstrated repeatedly, mostly using your own information, that none of this is true.

Maintenance costs are under £100,000 a year, the facility remains even now the most energy efficient centre of its type, it is barely halfway through its expected lifespan having been rebuilt in 1987, and a recent visit by a structural engineer attested to it not being about to fall down in any way anytime soon.

This is not an issue on which reasonable people can reasonably differ – it is not and cannot be a matter of opinion. The facts, and we've presented them time and again, are compelling, whether or not you have chosen to ignore them. And along with the indomitable will of all the people across Oxford and beyond who have contributed so much to this Campaign, this means that only one reasonable conclusion is possible to reasonable people – that Temple Cowley Pools should remain open.

What may have been true once was your original stated aim of needing £1.5m from the sale of Temple Cowley Pools in order to fund the construction of the new pool in Blackbird Leys. Even that is now redundant – you stated last year that the new scheme was completely funded, and at the last City Executive Board it was revealed that you are running at a £5m surplus. So you have no need to sell yet another asset that by rights belongs to the people, and which you are supposed to hold in trust on their behalf.

Nonetheless, on the 21st January this year, you decided to put the Temple Cowley Pools site up for sale. The plot, incidentally, includes the car park for the adjacent library, so you have to wonder what beloved asset will go on sale next.

The Campaign reaction was considered and measured; should we continue? After extending the life of the Pools by three years was there any point in carrying on. You obviously know the answer; we of course continued, and we registered Temple Cowley Pools as an asset of

community value. The Council, in recognising this, acknowledges that the centre is of value to the local community, something that is clearly self-evident.

But that meant that an appropriate organisation could exercise a Right to Bid under the Localism Act legislation. So we did exactly that by forming a community interest company. We have until October 7th this year to put in a bid. You can then evaluate that bid and decide whether the community, the public you are here to serve, deserve to take over operating the centre, or whether you will sell to a property developer who will of course make a tidy profit from the transaction. In contrast, the community company is 'not-for-profit' – there are no shareholders to benefit financially, no well-paid employees and directors who can expect to gain; all profits, or 'surplus' as it is known, will go back into the centre, and/or back to public funds controlled by the Council.

It was very encouraging when I spoke at the last Council meeting and you debated the seventh petition from the general public asking you to co-operate with us, that so many councillors of all political persuasion announced their support and interest in our proposal. We have had encouragement from councillors since then, even I have to report very recently from a CEB member.

It is unfortunate then, that your council officers do not seem prepared to offer similar support. And here lies the problem for which I have come to you this evening to ask for your help. We have asked to meet with council officers to discuss our proposal; we have asked for the information we need to put together a credible, financially viable and acceptable proposal. This is a community group asking for help and information, not a commercial private developer experienced and used to making a profit out of the sale of public sector assets.

I have to report that we have been met with refusal, delay and a continuing lack of information. We have a deadline set by you of October 7th, which gets ever nearer; delay and lack of information and active co-operation from the council severely prejudices our bid. This we believe is both unfair and inequitable. So I am here this evening not only to provide an update, but to ask for your help, building on the encouragement and support you have provided in recent months; please speak with your council officers and ensure that they engage with us to provide the information that we need. Our plans to develop Temple Cowley Pools have met with overwhelming support as we consult with the public. Their support is being shown yet again through a petition – our eighth, yet another record for the Campaign and a record we wish we didn't have. And another record: speed. In the space of a week we have collected over 700 signatures towards the 1,500 needed to enable you to debate this matter. We have made it clear time and again that the people want Temple Cowley Pools kept open even if the Council doesn't. Please, collectively, work together and with the Council officers to help us to make our case.