

Closing Temple Cowley Pools – A Political Decision

My name is Nigel Gibson, and I'm speaking this evening as the Director of the SaveTCP community interest company, set up out of the Campaign to Save Temple Cowley Pools to keep health and exercise facilities where the community wants and needs them, in Temple Cowley.

I'm speaking this evening about the consequences of Labour's decision at both the City Executive Board Meeting on the 10th December last year, and also the Special Scrutiny Committee Meeting on the 23rd December, and also providing you with some insight into the community interest company's response to this decision.

What was most disappointing about the decision making process was the lack of engagement with what we were proposing, both from the council officers, but also Labour councillors themselves. We are very appreciative of the support that both the Green members and also the LibDems provided in the meetings themselves, but also outside. Even our Labour MP, Andrew Smith, took the time to meet with us, and discuss the proposal in sufficient detail to then be able to explain its merits to members of the public.

The decision to close Temple Cowley Pools was, of course, a purely political one, as established by the Inspector when considering your Core Strategy. So the lack of engagement from Labour is really no surprise. But everyone should be in no doubt: despite repeated requests, we were never provided with a set of criteria by which our proposal would be assessed. Indeed, we still have no idea what criteria were used. We were compared for the most part with the £3.6m conditional offer from Catalyst. And conditional is the operative word here. If you had looked into the detail of this offer at the meetings, we would not have had to use Freedom of Information to establish that there is no guarantee that you will achieve this headline figure, so rendering any monetary comparison with our figure as meaningless. You also chose to pointedly ignore your obligations under the Public Services (Social Value) Act to consider the value to the community of any proposal. Our bid, taking over and operating Temple Cowley Pools at no cost or risk to the Council, can offer a value to the community equivalent to £20m a year.

So, what of the consequences? The rush to shut Temple Cowley Pools at 4pm on the 23rd December, without any notice to the public, followed by the immediate boarding up of the site on the morning of the 24th indicates that you knew exactly what the outcome of the meeting was going to be.

Interesting also that you have left the library car park available for use. For the moment. There were immediate complaints not only over the closure itself, but also the now very restricted parking. How many people are aware that the library car park is also part of the sale, and will disappear completely if the site is developed?

We have constantly highlighted the impact on the public of closure, and this is recognised by yourselves in your Core Strategy Policy CS21, although totally ignored at your decision making meetings in December. You have placed in the Core Strategy obligations on yourselves not to close a leisure centre if it causes a "deficiency in the area", and to ensure that alternative facilities are in a location "equally or more accessible by walking, cycling or public transport" – you simply can't argue that for someone who walked or cycled to Temple Cowley Pools, then any of the other leisure centres meet these criteria. And public transport is limited to one bus route. The claim that the new Blackbird Leys swimming pool is a replacement for people in Temple Cowley just indicates that you don't understand the area. Unlike the councillors who in 1963 built a swimming pool in Blackbird Leys recognising that it is a totally different community, in a totally different place, from Cowley.

The Campaign surveyed users three years ago around their intentions if Temple Cowley Pools was closed – something the council didn't dare to do because it would have revealed just how much opposition there was to what you have now done. This survey revealed that about 20% would simply drop any form of exercise. We carried out another similar survey just before Christmas. And again it showed that 20% of Temple Cowley Pools users would stop any form of exercise. It really is disgraceful that a council actively sets out to withdraw health and fitness facilities from residents through a purely political decision. We have received many emails from people about how they are exercising less, and having to travel much further at additional cost, as a result of the closure.

And what of the community interest company and our proposal? Well, it is still viable, it proposes a housing density in line with that mandated by the Inspector, and remains the best way for people in the Cowley area to maintain the health, fitness and independence away from the NHS as they grow older. And we don't intend to let them down, so are pursuing a number of options to achieve what the community wants to see. As at present we have no other way of challenging your decision, we are being forced reluctantly to look at legal action. But it's not something we want by choice, and I would invite you yet again to consider how best you can meet the needs of your communities, the ones who elected you to look after their interests, and who are now shocked to find that you have so readily ignored them.