

Nigel Gibson - Address to Full Council September 2015 - "The Ears Have It"

Since 2009 I've been observing the way in which the Council engages with its citizens. After all, Oxford City Council's sole purpose is to provide services that we want and need, where we want and need them. All too often, I've seen the Council fail in this one simple task; maybe not in the eyes of the ruling elite, the Oxford Labour group, or in the eyes of the Council officer senior management team, but certainly this is the view from the other side, the view of the people to whom you have a responsibility to deliver services.

I've considered why there seems to be such a gap between what you think you are delivering, and how what you actually deliver is perceived by the general public, and I have concluded that it is due to the interpretation of one word : consultation.

To us, the general public, when the Council says it is carrying out a 'consultation', we believe it to mean that you are going to explain to us what you want to do, listen to what we want, then respond to deliver what we are asking for. Unfortunately for Oxford, this is far from the truth. What you mean by 'consultation' is that you present to us what you have decided to do, and it doesn't matter what we think, or what we tell you about how it will affect our everyday lives – and for individuals, the impact of your strategy or decisions can be very real, encompassing a complete lack of service, a lack of access, a reduction in well-being, quality of life and even in some cases a reduction in life expectancy. You conveniently ignore any of these consequences where they don't fit with your 'city view'. And it doesn't matter what evidence we provide, you ignore everything unless it can be made to fit conveniently and support what you have already decided to do.

As ever, I looked for some evidence to support my observations; I looked to see what affect public consultation has on anything you've done in recent times. So I asked a question under Freedom of Information FOI4696. I asked what consultations had happened over the last three years, how many members of the public had responded, and what material effect any comments had had on what you had decided to do.

The results were interesting, well perhaps intriguing rather than interesting. During the 3 year period there were 119 consultations, with amazingly low numbers of respondents. 2 consultations had zero response, 80 of them had under 100 responses, and only three had more than 500 responses. For a population of 150,000, it is to my mind extraordinary that in each case you have accepted such a low level of engagement, interpreted it as suitably representative of people's views as a whole, and just kept going irrespective of feedback. That you take such little notice of anyone who does bother to engage is clear – you don't report, unless asked, on what difference consultation has made. When I asked for the effect we the public had had as a result of these consultations I was told that you don't hold this information, and that because it would take an hour of officer time to check for each consultation, you weren't prepared to do it. So I asked if you could do it for one, or a few; again I was told that this wouldn't be possible.

I have of course had direct experience of consultation, or rather lack of it, through the Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign. You do need reminding that the very first petition, at over 12,000 signatures the largest in the history of Oxford, was totally ignored by the City Executive, with your leader declaring that it wasn't the whole of Oxford so you don't need to take any notice of it. And the 'consultation' overwhelmingly showed that the public wanted Temple Cowley Pools to remain open.

I then took the Council to Judicial Review because you hadn't run the consultation properly. The judge found in my favour on this, declaring that you hadn't followed the proper process – she then qualified that finding by saying that it really didn't matter as the Save Temple Cowley Pools

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Campaign had done the Council's consultation work for it, and represented the public view to the Council. I was offered no opportunity to explain what had really happened during the Council's 'consultation'. [Council required some text to be removed from this paragraph as it is considered "defamatory and offensive"]

The recent consultation on your Leisure Strategy is an exemplar of how you show zero interest in properly listening to the public, and how you show no concern at the extremely level of engagement with the public you are here to serve. In this consultation, just over 100 members of the public bothered to respond, and only one school was in direct contact. And you consider that level of engagement appropriate to support your now unchallenged view of how you will affect people's quality of life and level of health and fitness over the next five years. And so, according to your document, provide a world class leisure service.

Some interesting supporting evidence is provided in an Appendix. There are two identical coloured maps showing access (or perhaps I should say lack of access) to swimming across the city. This is not real information, just the result of an 'expert' system from Sport England, so it must of course be right. On these maps, you will see a pink area in North Oxford; this shows, apparently, that people living there are within a 20 minute walk of five swimming pools. Whilst technically correct, only one of those, Ferry, provides any sort of public access, and that is increasingly limited by classes and provision to the Swimming Club. No-one I've spoken to recognises the view that you are using to support your strategy, and nowhere in the strategy development do you comment on how wrong this interpretation is.

And down here in the East, or South as you seem to prefer to call it, we have a finding that you have conveniently ignored for over five years. You can see an area coloured in blue, which shows where people have to walk more than 20 minutes to get to a swimming pool. So, severe lack of access - a hole. A Blue Hole. where you are satisfied that you are providing a 'world class leisure service' despite so many people unable to walk for a swim, in the area of Oxford that has seen the highest rate of population growth in the city over the last fifteen years. And this is not the first time you will have seen the Blue Hole. When the general public formed a community interest company last year and offered to run Temple Cowley Pools, asking for no financial support from yourselves, we presented research from a health expert, and a member of Brookes; part of that showed that if people are forced to travel more than 15 minutes to get to where they want to exercise, they don't go as frequently or at all.

I asked earlier this year what previous users of Temple Cowley Pools were doing now; not surprisingly, you refused to do that work. So, yet again the Campaign has done the work for you; we are currently carrying out a survey in East Oxford of previous users. To date, and this is a continuing survey so incomplete, everyone, absolutely everyone, say they would use Temple Cowley Pools if it was to reopen; and all of them say they are exercising less frequently or not at all since you closed the doors last December, with people still in it.

Our proposal to take over Temple Cowley Pools under a Community Asset Transfer also had an appendix with a map very much like this, although it was much, much closer to reality. And we highlighted, shown on this map, the people you were abandoning through the closure to a lower quality of life and lower health outcomes. Yes, it was a Blue Hole – maps pretty much to your independent research validating your strategy doesn't it? Of course, you have now invested £500,000 of our money in a part-time gym at Spires Academy, and you are trumpeting this as being adequate health and fitness provision in the area; well, you weren't listening the first time we told you, so you need to be reminded – you can't swim in a gym. And there are many, many people

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across all sorts of demographics for whom swimming is the best, and for some the only, way they can exercise.

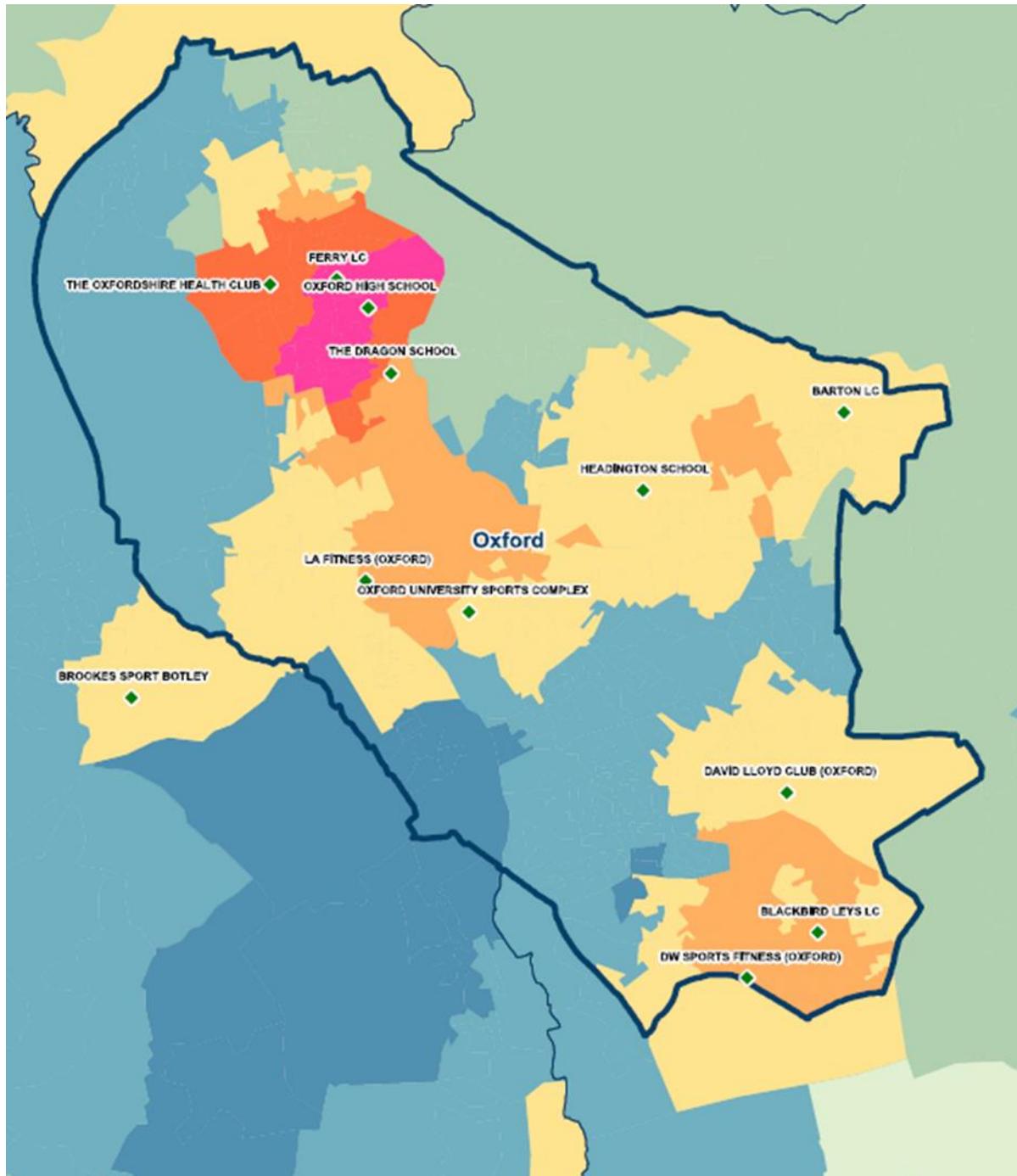
The Ears theme you see in the public gallery this evening was devised by several campaign groups across the city, all frustrated at your arrogant attitude towards the public, where you simply tell us what you are going to do without listening properly to what services we want and need, where we want and need them. These groups felt that if you were presented with some additional ears you might listen more, and more attentively, to the people you are here to represent and deliver services to.

So, this evening I offer you the Blue Hole challenge – are you prepared to fill the void left by your decision to close Temple Cowley Pools, listen to and talk with the people of Oxford who are still ready, willing and able to take over the site, and bring it back into use at no cost to the Council?

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Maps referenced in the Address – From Appendix 3A of Oxford City Council Draft Leisure Strategy:

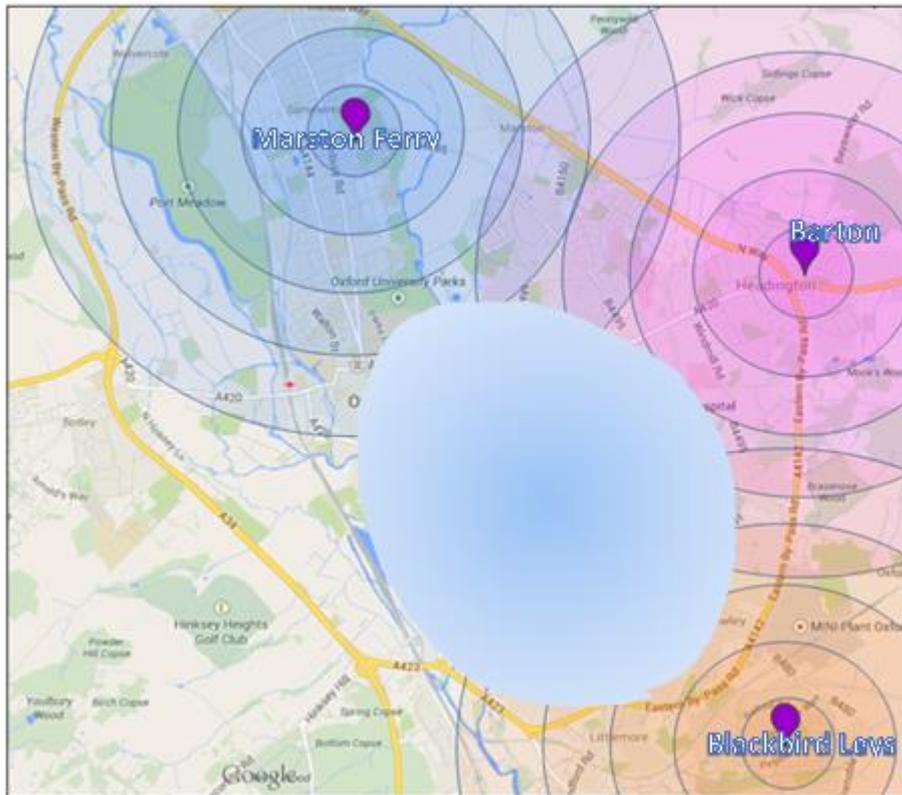
- Pink area in north shows 5 swimming pools within 20 minute walking distance – this is completely unrealistic as they are not accessible to all citizens
- Similarly in East Oxford the light beige area around David Lloyd is also unrealistic



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Maps referenced in the Address – From Community Asset Transfer Proposal from SaveTCP CIC:

- The ‘Blue Hole’ in central/East Oxford identifies areas of population who cannot sensibly access a City Council-owned swimming pool within 15 minutes by walking or cycling, and hence are not touched by the Oxford City Council Leisure Strategy. This includes the area of Cowley Marsh, which has seen the largest population increase of any Oxford ward over the last fifteen years.



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