

DELAY THE DESTRUCTION OF TEMPLE COWLEY POOLS

I am speaking to Council this evening in my capacity as Director of the community interest company, set up last year 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 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 planning permission for housing that is twice your permitted density. Obviously no conflict of interest there.

The reason I'm speaking this evening is because Catalyst have publicly announced that during December they intend demolishing the Temple Cowley Pools site. No doubt that will come as a great relief to many councillors, as you may think that will remove the reason for the Campaign to Save Temple Cowley Pools existing – unfortunately for you, not so, as I'll explain a bit later.

Catalyst intend destroying a perfectly sound building – 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. At present there is no Planning Application from Catalyst for the intended replacement, 46 dwellings – at twice the housing density permitted by the Council's planning rules. So, why is Catalyst doing this, presumably at its own cost?

Councillors have been saying since last December that the land has been sold, so it's nothing to do with the Council any more, and we should be talking to Catalyst. Catalyst on the other hand, say that they are only there to build houses, and that the timing of the destruction of Temple Cowley Pools is determined by the Council. Members of the public, who simply want health and fitness facilities where they can sensibly use them, have been caught between the two – very convenient for some.

What is this facility that we are talking about? Very often exactly what you have closed and we have no longer have gets lost – Temple Cowley Pools was rebuilt in 1986. 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. And what are the consequences of closing Temple Cowley Pools? As part of our proposal for a Community Asset Transfer, we identified several key areas, predicting a significant impact on the community. These ranged from increased isolation and reduction in health of individuals, through increased carbon emissions for the city, to an increase in crime.

All of these are essentially due to the lack of access. We showed this clearly with the Blue Hole, the area in which people, as a result of your actions in closing Temple Cowley Pools, will 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.

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You recently endorsed this in your Leisure Strategy, 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 not people who have always lived in that area – these are people from whom you have taken away a facility, knowingly, actively and deliberately removed their ability to exercise locally. As you haven't done, it we have – it's approximate, but it used the information supplied to us by your 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 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.

And what are the consequences? If we revisit what we forecast. We also asked you to track what 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 last December was 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.

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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. Whether you demolish Temple Cowley Pools in December or not, the Blue Hole will still exist – and the 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.

I am asking you this evening to instruct Catalyst immediately to delay any demolition until after planning permission has been finally approved. In that way, you can avoid having an empty area of land as your legacy, that will remind everyone walking past of what could have been. You have the power to do this, and it is in the clear and obvious interests of the people who you were elected to represent to use that power.

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