

In this address, I am presenting Council with a petition asking you to work with the community to replace the deficit you have created in Cowley, namely the provision of health and fitness facilities.

This is the 9th petition that the Campaign to Save Temple Cowley Pools has presented to Council. The very first petition presented to Council, at over 12,000 handwritten signatures, was simply dismissed as not being the whole of Oxford. But the support to keep the centre open was clear. As it was with the second petition. And again. And again. In fact, 7 more times, and with tonight's submission you have the opportunity to debate it for a 9th time.

Each time, the request from the community has been pointedly ignored by the Labour leadership. This is unfortunate, particularly as so many Labour Councils across the UK have chosen to work with the public they have been elected to represent, and so enable so many groups of people to maintain their health and fitness.

I need to remind you what we have lost. Or rather, what you have actively and knowingly removed from the people of Cowley and East Oxford. Labour decided in 2009 that Temple Cowley Pools should close. No discussion with the public, no real consideration of options, just a series of assertions which we in the Campaign duly picked apart – every one of the Council arguments for closure was shown time and again to be a combination of inaccurate, incomplete, misleading and untrue. We challenged successive Leisure Portfolio Holders on the City Executive Board to provide just one argument that could stand up to scrutiny. No-one was able to. Even council officers were tasked with this, and despite several attempts couldn't do it either. But, as noted by the Planning Inspector when considering the Sites and Housing Plan where the public's preferences weren't even acknowledged, let alone considered, the decision was a political one, not based on planning criteria.

And a year before you voted for closure, you commissioned two independent reports on the Temple Cowley Pools building, both of which didn't help your position as they said there was nothing wrong with it.

What was so great about this building? Well, to start with it was in the right place. You designated Temple Cowley as a 'transport hub', with over 20 bus services from across the City and beyond. This contrasts with the new Blackbird Leys pool, where you may have multiple services (well two to be exact) but they travel along the same bus route. And the combination of facilities in one place made it what it was. A diving pool – the only one in the whole of the county. You closed it as soon as you could, to save money. But it was well used and was precisely the sort of community diving facility that Sport England say is wanted to help young people develop an interest in an Olympic sport. A 25m competition pool. The only difference with the one at Blackbird Leys being it was designed with sufficient seating – a shame this wasn't done correctly with the new pool, because being able to hold larger galas was a principle reason the Swimming Club wanted Temple Cowley Pools shut. And as part of the new build in 1986, Channel 4 put in the cabling that enabled swimming competitions to be broadcast from there.

What else? Well, water that was low-chlorine – this meant that people, and children in particular, with breathing difficulties such as asthma, were able to swim there. No goggles needed. Again, the only pool in the county where parents could bring their asthmatic children. A desperately valuable facility – removed by Labour. And the list of features goes on – sauna and steam suite, gym, and exercise studio. Oh, and the changing rooms – open, not the much hated village style where you can't shower properly and you have to trail your belongings all over the place. Try going to Ferry, and see the number of swimmers using the dry change as an example of what not to provide people.

And the combination was unique. And enabled the women only sessions to be completely enclosed, and when you came to your senses and actually provided female only staff for them, total segregation. That's why they were so well attended, particularly by the muslim community. Compare that to any women only sessions now in any of your leisure centres.

And finally, being part of a primary district centre (the only one in Oxford) meant that you could combine a visit to Temple Cowley Pools with a visit to the library or the nearby shops.

And so you forced the closure in December 2014, and last year the demolition, of this facility. I noted at the last Full Council meeting the Labour leadership declaring that unfortunately you didn't have the money, and there wasn't anywhere to build it. Wrong on both counts.

Well, perhaps you would have enough money if you hadn't wasted it on the Blackbird Leys pool. The Campaign's request to take community ownership was fully costed, as part of which we discussed build costs with specialist contractors. We checked with them again recently. Instead of the £13m+ it cost you (or rather us, the taxpayers), you could still have built the Blackbird Leys pool for under £3m.

And where would you build it? Well, the obvious place is now a wasteland. Just outside the library at Temple Cowley. Shame you told Catalyst to demolish it last year.

You need to recognise what you have done. Closing, and now demolishing, Temple Cowley Pools, has left a deficit in the area. Most of the people who used to use Temple Cowley Pools don't go as frequently, or at all, to anywhere else for exercise. This is a disgrace in an area that has seen the biggest population rise in Oxford in recent years. What you have done has removed these facilities, from over 40,000 people. These are your own figures. And this is the "Blue Hole" you have created, and the gap we are asking you through this petition to redress. And it doesn't have to cost the Council any money at all. The community would work with the Council, and Catalyst, to raise the necessary funds to construct a new leisure facility that people want and need, where they want and need it. And it could be combined with housing. Very simple, and could be seen as a world class legacy, a final act by the City Council as local government transforms across the county.

The petition, with over 1,500 signatures, reads:

We, the undersigned, call on Oxford City Council to address the loss of health, fitness and exercise facilities in the 'Blue Hole', caused by the Labour-led City Council's closure of Temple Cowley Pools in December 2014, and extend for five years in the Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2020 adopted in September 2015.

2. Address by Nigel Gibson – meeting the needs of ordinary people (replacing health and fitness facilities in Cowley)

Response from Councillor Smith, Board Member for Leisure, Parks and Sport.

The premise of the address is false: there is not an unmet need for leisure facilities in Cowley. The new Leys Pools and Leisure Centre is an excellent replacement for Temple Cowley Pool just 1.5 miles away. Cowley residents are also within easy travelling distance to public gym facilities at Spires Academy and Rose Hill Community Centre and Oxford University swimming pool where the council has secured a community use agreement is also within easy reach.

The data on participation shows that the council's strategy for providing leisure services has been successful. Since 2009 when the council entered into partnership with Fusion the overall number of visits to leisure facilities has increased 53%. Just less than 470,000 more visits when compared with the period prior to the transfer to Fusion

Overall participation has increased year on year by 129,699 to 1,445,813

- 27% increase in users aged over 50
- 38% increase in users aged under 16
- 32% increase in users with disabilities
- 12% increase in users from black, minority and ethnic users
- 28% increase in women and girl users
- 2% increase in 60+ swim participation
- 10% increase in under 17 swim participation

At the same time subsidy per user has reduced from £2.14 in 2010 to £0.07 in 2015/16, carbon emissions from our leisure facilities continue to fall, and customer satisfaction currently stands at 95%.

I understand why residents of Temple Cowley loved the old pool and were sad about its closure, and of course it will be slightly less convenient for some users to travel to alternative facilities. However the decision to close it was correct and the evidence shows that it has not resulted in fewer people making use of our council leisure facilities.

