

I feel the need to speak to Council again on Democracy, or rather the increasing lack of it, in Oxford City Council. This relates specifically to item 20 on the Agenda at this meeting, relating to yet more changes to the Constitution.

The report supporting the changes argues that these are solely in the interests of the citizens of Oxford, because of the increased number of questions and addresses made to Council in recent times.

A fundamental question is, “why has the number increased?” This is not addressed in any way in the officer report. I am very aware of the reason, as I and my fellow campaigners have often been the people asking questions and making addresses. When we ask questions of councillors and council officers, we expect answers that at least attempt to directly address the issue. Time and again we have found this not to be the case, and so have had to ask more questions. If Council were to answer the questions openly, honestly and fully, we would not need to be doing this.

But, rather than answer questions properly, the Council has chosen instead to implement increasingly draconian measures to limit opportunities for the public to interact with them.

This is how democracy has been slowly but surely been squeezed out of the Council process:

- At the City Executive Board, when we started the Save Temple Cowley Pools campaign, we were permitted to ask questions in person. There was even the opportunity for a follow-up, a level of interaction that is simply not permitted now.
- CEB obviously got fed up with being so directly challenged, and moved to answering questions without having them read out. This was particularly bizarre, as the questioners weren't aware their questions were being answered, and the watching public, and probably the councillors as well, didn't have a clue what was going on.
- This then moved to having the questions answered in written form, and simply made available at the meetings. At least everyone could read what was going on, and didn't have to divine what was being said in the meeting.
- More was to follow. Again, simply because questions were not being answered, a much larger body of campaigners asked a record number of questions at the June CEB, well over 100. They were dutifully answered on paper; of course, there was no comeback if the questioner wasn't satisfied with the answer.
- At the July CEB, a similarly large number of questions were asked, but instead of answering the individually as required by the Constitution, they were grouped together and provided with general answers. So, not just incomplete answers now, but irrelevant ones as well!
- And then the Chief Executive declared that he was not prepared for any more questions to be answered at CEB, completely against both the Constitution and democratic principles.

Remember, if the questions had been answered fully in the first place, the public wouldn't be so cross that they feel the need to ask another one.

And so the Constitutional changes came in:

- The only way of clarifying an incomplete or incorrect answer was to ask another question at the following CEB – this has now been stopped.
- And the notice for questions has been extended from 1pm on the day before, to 9.30 two clear days beforehand. In practice, this means that for an Agenda published on a Wednesday afternoon, the public have just over 24 hours to read, digest and then put together questions relating to agenda items that are being voted on.

This is simply wrong. And there's more, in the Constitutional changes being proposed at this council meeting. In future, the public will have to give ten days' notice when they wish to make an address, and then also provide the full text. This stifles yet further the democratic voice, as who will pre-plan such things. And there appears to be no change in the agenda publication timetable, so we will have to write our address a week before we know what the agenda is!

The Council seems determined to prevent the public having any voice at its meetings; this is not right, and I ask all councillors whether they really want to hear their constituents views in this public forum, or do they simply want to exist in a hermetically sealed bubble of local politics, insulated from their voters?