

Just over eighteen months ago I became aware of the Council's intention to close Temple Cowley Pools & Fitness Centre. I tried to understand the reasoning behind the intention, and the more I looked into the issue the more concerned I became. The council seemed to have little concern for what the public thought over the issue, and the many requests we made as a campaign group yielded answers that only prompted more and more questions. We were told in the end that we simply had to trust the experts, as we couldn't possibly know or appreciate the detail. We carefully examined what we were being told, and checked with independent experts as well. We found we were able to challenge every point being put forward by the council as to why the only publicly funded leisure facility inside the ring road in East Oxford should close. And this remains the case.

We have always ensured that we share what we find with both the Council's leisure department and all the Councillors, of whatever political persuasion. The consequence is that we have a highly controversial issue that in council is separated by only 3 votes, overwhelming public opinion that Temple Cowley Leisure Centre should remain open, along with the existing Blackbird Leys Swimming Pool, and supported by the largest ever petition in the history of Oxford.

The argument is simple, particularly in these times of financial austerity – why spend £16m of taxpayers money on a new, non-Olympic, only 25m, swimming pool when £3m will refurbish and improve two existing leisure facilities, enabling them to remain open for another twenty years?

Despite the simplicity of this argument, the council has continued to press on, spending more than £600,000 over the last year on consultancy fees to support its case. The irony is that by its own figures just under £1m is required to perform all the required maintenance on these leisure centres, yet another example of where dogma seems to have overrun logic. A quick comparison of the campaign website, <http://tiny.cc/savetcp>, with the Council's leisure webpages, will show how the council is willing to mislead the casual reader. We have always been at pains to ensure that all available information, both for and against closure, is made there for anyone to read and challenge, and anyone can contact us via email at [savetcp@gmail.com](mailto:savetcp@gmail.com). We wholeheartedly believe in evidence based decision making, and it was good to hear that the councillor now responsible for this issue on the City Executive Board is also committed to evidence based decision making. However, of immediate concern was one of his first statements, made at the last CEB meeting, that the proposed new swimming pool at Blackbird Leys would provide Oxford with a "world class" facility. There is absolutely no evidence that a 25m swimming pool tacked onto a leisure centre more than 30 years old is "world class", either for Oxford or anywhere else. We expect a "world class" swimming facility to have a 50m pool, with a diving pool and have some sort of heat exchange incorporated into it as well, like an ice rink (or even crematorium). So this is all disappointing, given the amount of evidence we have uncovered and shared over the

last eighteen months. We don't believe that councillors would willingly deceive the public, and our campaign is most definitely not a political one. We are aware from Freedom of Information requests that the council's leisure department does brief councillors with information that is partial and misleading – that's why we spend our time challenging what is said.

And so even more disappointing was the news a few weeks ago that a Labour councillor was distributing a letter, on Council headed paper with the implication that it was officially endorsed, telling the voters in Cowley Marsh ward, where the Temple Cowley Leisure Centre sits, that the facility must close, and using information that has been around for many months, with arguments that have been used time and time again and that have been continually discredited. We issued an open letter in response which we also delivered to the voters of Cowley Marsh, pointing out all the shortcomings in the letter. Councillors who put their name to this type of propaganda do themselves and their party no good whatsoever. The response we have had has been overwhelming. Here's an example from an email received by the campaign a few days ago:

"I also would like to say that of all of the pools in all of Oxford, the Temple Cowley pool has always remained my favourite, out of all of the facilities in Oxford I have used, and that also includes in relation to private gyms as well. This means that I am extremely concerned about losing this facility, and really would hope that it would be preserved..."

She goes on to say:

"...I am writing to you today, after having received a letter from Councillor Malik a few days ago, and then receiving your letter through the door a few days later.

I will admit that when I received Councillor Malik's letter, I was dismayed and distressed by his letter, and made me want to write a reply to express my concerns and dismay at his letter, however, the letter was in such detail that I felt that this would be difficult to respond to adequately, so this is why I am writing in gratitude that your campaign has put together such a great letter to counter his arguments on the behalf of people like myself instead."

She goes on to make a number of points as to why she thinks Temple Cowley Pools should be kept open, and concludes:

"As someone who has also trained in diving, in Oxford, I would also be really keen to see the diving pool re-opened. I would be really keen to see this pool used by the diving clubs that are in Oxford since it is a specialist pool for this purpose, and it is a shame at present that this pool is not even being used."

So, let's look at the facts and the arguments.

- Temple Cowley Pools & Fitness Centre is actually a complete leisure centre, comprising a 25m competition swimming pool, diving pool, learner pool, gym, sauna, steam room and exercise studio, that the Council has deliberately failed to maintain for the last ten years, and is now claiming is too costly to run - not true, the Greens have agreed a budget with the Council Finance Department that would keep TCP running for the next 25 years!
- The council claims that it costs half a million pounds each year to run Temple Cowley Pools - not true. The council pays Fusion a single sum to operate all leisure centres, and Fusion takes the admission income - the claimed 'cost' is an old figure from two years ago when the Council ran the centres, and even that is debatable.
- Carbon emissions. Temple Cowley Pools is the most energy efficient wet/dry leisure centre in Oxford, and the Council wants to knock it down! They claim that TCP's carbon emissions are 10% of the council's 'core' emissions at 885 tonnes CO2 equiv, whereas a new pool would be only 300 tonnes CO2 equiv. This is totally misleading. When you compare like with like, the TCP swimming pool only generates 180 tonnes CO2 equiv, way below that of the proposed new pool. The other TCP facilities include a sauna, that runs on electricity so obviously the carbon cost is higher. But still TCP is energy efficient - it could be even more energy efficient if the Council would invest a few thousand pounds in pool covers to stop evaporation of heated water - but then it would be even more efficient compared to the proposed new pool.
- Transport - TCP is in Temple Cowley, a designated transport hub serviced by 23 bus routes from across the city. There is even a bus from Rose Hill that was put on specifically for the users of Peers swimming pool when the council allowed that leisure centre to close. In contrast, there is a bus service to Blackbird Leys that is 'regular' only if you live on the Cowley Road or are coming from the City Centre. Existing users will find their transport costs exceeding the price of admission! The Council's own core strategy is to promote walking, but the only people able to walk to the new pool will live in one area, Blackbird Leys. Most people will have to drive, significantly increasing carbon emissions and likely to bring gridlock congestion in Blackbird Leys itself, a 20mph residential area with traffic calming and where most roads around the leisure centre there are single lane.
- There is simply no demand for a new swimming pool at Blackbird Leys. The existing swimming pool in Blackbird Leys is open to the public for less than ten hours a week, but is well-used by disadvantaged groups, nine schools and the canoe club. The demand for leisure and exercise in the Cowley community ie at TCP, is overwhelming. The Save TCP campaign submitted the largest ever

petition in the history of Oxford, over 12,000 signatures, to the Council last year - Labour simply weren't interested. Fusion forecasts just under 400,000 visits a year at the new pool, and yet the existing facilities have over 450,000! We, the council tax-payers, will be paying £16m to decrease leisure usage in the city!

- Why is this happening? Fusion, who operate the leisure centres, stand to benefit massively from closing two facilities (saving costs and cutting about 30 staff). They will also be charging us, the taxpayers, £150,000 a year to run the new pool, as well as taking all the admission charges. And by that time, we will be paying them £75,000 a year to run all the other ageing facilities (some older than TCP, like Ferry and the Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre!). Fusion is registered as a charity, but that is a tax avoidance measure - they keep our money to invest in their administrative overheads (ie management salaries) and leisure facilities elsewhere in the country, not in Oxford. And Labour? As well as buying votes in their Blackbird Leys stronghold, they believe they are capping the cost of a long-running leisure problem. Not so - the costs of the new pool to the taxpayer are not fixed, and will just skyrocket, and all for a facility that is only designed to last 25 years!

This white elephant of a vanity project shows a Labour administration committed to wasteful greenhouse gas emissions and who in an era of supposed austerity are content to spend £16m of our money when £3m keeping existing facilities is what the people of Oxford have shown they want.

In conclusion, I would urge all councillors to revisit this issue with an 'open mind', imagine that perhaps the briefings you get from the council leisure department may not be all that they seem, and look at the campaign website for a rounded view reflecting the reality of what your voters want from you. More and more we are hearing that ignoring your voters now means that they will ignore you when you want their votes next May.

At the City Executive Board next week the Labour administration will no doubt vote the way the Leisure Department wants them to, to proceed to build the proposed new pool at Blackbird Leys. The public will then have three months in which to challenge the decision through a judicial review. If that fails, we will be committed to a £16m vanity project that only vested interest and very few people want. Please look again at what the people you represent actually want, see what evidence rather than propaganda shows, and keep Temple Cowley Pools open.