

Decisions Concerning Leisure in East Oxford – Address to Council, 20th February 2012 – Nigel Gibson

My name is Nigel Gibson, and I am speaking as a representative of the Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign. For the avoidance of doubt, as some council officers and councillors seem not to be aware, the Campaign does not actually oppose the Council, or its intentions – we simply seek, and I have to say continue to seek despite a campaign that has now lasted over two years, clear evidence to justify your determination to close facilities that the general public want to remain open.

My attention was drawn last week to the Council's intentions to sign a contract for building the proposed new pool at Blackbird Leys. It seems strange that the Council should delay doing this until now, since you actually made your final decision to proceed with this venture last July. And it would seem that you were going to sign the contract last week until it became public, at a point that was just before a number of events:

1. This Council meeting, where the budget for the coming year will be determined. I note from the budget information provided at the last City Executive Board meeting that the financial outlay for the building work would not be until at least April of this year, but then this amount has not been approved, so why such haste to sign the contract now?
2. The application by a group of residents in Blackbird Leys for Town Green status for the park on which you wish to build the 25m swimming pool is, according to the County Council, going to be determined by a meeting that will probably be held in March. And if unsuccessful, no doubt the Town Green 14 may consider an appeal. But, if you sign the contract, and the application succeeds, there will no doubt be penalties for cancellation – why make that commitment now?
3. And then there is the Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign – no doubt many of you are aware that the Campaign is applying for a Judicial Review of your decision to go ahead with building the pool, and the consequent closure of Temple Cowley Leisure Centre. There are two grounds for the claim. The first is quite simple – you have not consulted properly with the public. For all the protestations about Focus Groups, and consultation meetings, which we have exposed in the past, you have never, ever asked the public the key question : do you want to close Temple Cowley Pools? And you haven't asked the question, because you are acutely aware that the answer will resoundingly and emphatically tell you what you don't want to hear – there is no support for closing it. The second reason for taking you to Judicial Review is because you have blatantly ignored some of the most disadvantaged people in Oxford; you have not considered the consequence of closing Temple Cowley Leisure Centre on groups such as elderly, inform, disabled and so on, and there are significant numbers of these people living inside the ring road in East Oxford who would simply not be able to take exercise as they do now in Temple Cowley Pools if they had to go further afield and by different means.

And so the application for Judicial Review is in, and we await the verdict of the first court. And just as with the Town Green application, if you sign the contract, and the Judicial Review is successful, there will no doubt be penalties for cancellation, so why make that commitment now?

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The Council is continually challenged with its own evidence that there is no demand for a 25m, non-Olympic swimming pool in Blackbird Leys at a cost heading steadily north of £13 million. And Labour councillors, with no justification, continually rubbish various proposals that would refurbish and improve both Temple Cowley Leisure Centre, including the diving pool, and the existing Blackbird Leys Swimming Pool. Even the residents of Blackbird Leys don't see the need for a new pool, as you have heard time and time again not only from Councillor Craft, but also from local people in the area who have been so appalled at your behaviour in not listening that they have been moved to apply for Town Green status for the park. And you, the Council, remain steadfast in your intention to remove publicly funded leisure facilities from inside the ring road in East Oxford by closing Temple Cowley Leisure Centre, and thus depriving a group of communities easy access to leisure – the cost, the time taken and the hassle of not being able to walk or cycle to their leisure centre will inevitably mean less exercise, fitness and a degradation in the health of these communities. Above all, of course, the Council has never actually consulted with the public and asked them the simple question, "Do you want Temple Cowley Leisure Centre to remain open?"

And so we are left with what appears to be a dogged determination by the Council to waste our, the council taxpayers', money, on this exercise. I've spoken in the past about the lack of openness and transparency in the way this exercise is being undertaken. All the information produced by the Council in support of the proposed new 25m swimming pool remains a combination of misleading, inaccurate, incomplete and untrue, and this information is seized on with relish as what is misplaced justification for the project by the Labour councillors who it would seem do not care about the people in the Temple Cowley Area.

And so the intention to enter into this contract, uncovered at the last minute, is yet another sign of this. And we can only assume that there is a clear intention to try and lock the city into this ill-fated venture by contractually binding us all, without our knowledge, to have to pay millions of pounds in compensation if the contract cannot proceed simply because ordinary citizens are exercising, publicly and openly, their democratic rights in questioning and asking for evidence. You, the Council, stand condemned in the sight of the general public by your actions; you have not justified either building a new pool, or closing two perfectly good facilities. Tying the council financially tighter and tighter with public money so that your aims can be pursued may not be illegal, but increasingly the public are questioning your moral compass in ignoring their wishes. And because there remains so much public support to keep Temple Cowley Leisure Centre open, as well as the existing Blackbird Leys Swimming Pool, the Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign will continue.