

Disability and Leisure in Oxford

My name is Nigel Gibson, and I am speaking on behalf of the Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign.

In attempting, unsuccessfully as far as the general public is concerned, to make its case for closing two perfectly good leisure facilities and replacing them with one single 25m non-Olympic swimming pool in a place where there is no demand, the Council claims that a new pool will be so much better because it will be compliant with the DDA, the Disability Discrimination Act.

Well, like all the information that the Council has provided in support of its ill-fated venture with over £13m of taxpayers money, on examination this claim proves yet again to be a combination of misleading, inaccurate, incomplete and untrue.

I was speaking recently with a lady whose husband is disabled; he uses Temple Cowley Pools several times a week - not for swimming, but simply to get into the water and exercise. It's only 15-20 minutes a time, but he goes when he wants to and he can get there in a wheelchair.

It's really interesting that the Council and their highly paid consultants who are "experts" (and so we must trust them when they say claim that Temple Cowley Leisure Centre is not DDA compliant, whereas the proposed new swimming pool in Blackbird Leys is compliant. The DDA is the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 that has led to changes in many public spaces to increase access for the disabled. Mind you, there's no way anyone in a wheelchair can get to see the Council at work in the Town Hall; access to the council viewing gallery for most fully-abled people is a complete pain, and extremely uncomfortable once you do get there. The acoustics are so bad that it is difficult for most to hear all that is said in council meetings.

Apparently the proposed new, only-25m, non-Olympic pool at Blackbird Leys will be DDA compliant. Well, let's compare and contrast.

At TCP, disabled swimming provision means that this gentleman has his own access to the pool area, through a corridor with separate large changing facilities. These are close to the pool, he can have a poolside wheelchair to get him to the water, or he has the option of a hoist. However, hoists are not what he wants - although physically disabled, he wants his dignity retained, and Temple Cowley Leisure Centre provides that - the proposed new pool would not.

The competition swimming pool at Temple Cowley Leisure Centre provides gently shelving steps with a handrail - this preserves dignity with access to water for those who can walk, like this man. He doesn't want to have to use a hoist, and he doesn't want to have the dependence or trouble or to take the time having to drive further away, which for him would mean Blackbird Leys if the Council gets its way.

Now, at the proposed new pool, there will be no shelving steps - access will be built into the sides of the pool; the vertical climb in and out will be too much for him. The option of a hoist will be very public and will not preserve his dignity. Neither will the other option, of having to use the 'learner pool', which will be too shallow for the exercise he takes.

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Apparently the proposed new pool is DDA compliant - apparently Temple Cowley Leisure Centre is not.

Well, have we got news for you - if you take the time to read the DDA, it says quite clearly that it is not possible to be "compliant" – only that appropriate measures need to be taken to provide access as far as practicable. Hence, the Council provides disabled access to the floor of their debating chamber via a lift at the Town Hall, but it would be too difficult and costly to provide similar access to the cramped viewing area, so they haven't.

The only DDA issue at TCP is the lack of a lift to get someone in a wheelchair up to the first floor and use the exercise studio and the gym. Well, the lift shaft is there, we know because (a) we can see that as you walk in to TCP, and (b) the architect tells us he designed it - but, the Council, even nearly 30 years ago, decided to cut costs and not put a lift there, despite it being on the council's approved plans... but they could now, and for less than the £13m+ it's costing us to get a non-Olympic size pool that is less accessible than TCP.

And as a further demonstration of how the information we get fed from the Council is a combination of misleading, inaccurate, incomplete and untrue, the DDA is not even the correct legislation! It has been replaced by the Equality Act in 2011, which inherited much of the DDA and kept the same disability provisions.

So, when anyone from the Council, or a Labour Councillor or their canvassers, try and tell you that TCP isn't DDA compliant, you know the real story. The current Temple Cowley Leisure Centre is already DDA 'compliant', and preserves the dignity of disabled people in a way that the proposed new pool won't. Even if they make a provision at this late stage it won't have been designed in from the start. This is yet another demonstration that the proposed new pool is not wanted by the people of Oxford, who do want a publicly funded leisure facility inside the ring road where they want to use it. It is not too late for the Council to listen to the people, and keep Temple Cowley Pools open.

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