

Swimming Pools in Oxfordshire

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

Some of you may have noticed recently an article in the Oxford Times concerning water space; not in Oxford, for a change, but down in Didcot, in South Oxfordshire.

The Barramundi swimming club has operated successfully there for many years. This is despite the swimming facilities. The swimming pool in Didcot, the Didcot Wave, is extremely popular – it has a wave machine that operates every 20 minutes during certain sessions, much loved by children and adults alike. It combines a normal swimming lane area with a childrens play and learner area; this cleverly shelves down in to the main pool, adding to the effect of the wave machine, and providing a natural progression as non-swimmers migrate to swimming. And it also has a flume that attracts queues, mostly children, when it is operating.

Now, back to Oxford. When you talk to people about what they want from any new water and swimming space, they invariably talk about, not a competition pool, but something that offers a fun environment with a range of things to do. Pretty much like the Didcot Wave. But, of course, the Council has ignored what the public wants, and is hell-bent on providing, at a cost heading steadily north of £13m, a swimming pool that is only 25m, is non-Olympic, and with the forced closure of two perfectly sound facilities will reduce the amount of water space we have and also get rid of about 30 jobs. It will also get rid of the only publicly funded diving pool in Oxford. This diving pool offered variety when it was open, and could be brought back into use simply and affordably.

There has been a persistent rumour, yet again repeated only recently at a hustings by Andrew Smith MP, that the proposed new swimming pool at Blackbird Leys would be bigger. But not so – this rumour persists, and the Council is happy for it to persist even though it knows it is not true.

One of the reasons the Council is spending our money on this ill-fated scheme is in response to the threat from the City of Oxford Swimming Club, that if they didn't get given a brand new pool then they would have to close. At the moment, the club pays about £30,000 a year to use a variety of council pools; if the proposed scheme goes through, the club will have priority over the public in competing for the smaller amount of swimming water and time. The Save Temple Cowley Pools Campaign spoke with the Swimming Club a couple of years ago and asked them what they wanted, and why they wanted Temple Cowley Leisure Centre closed. Interestingly, they didn't want to see TCP closed; they wanted more and better seating, and more car parking spaces for their competitions. But they did want a new swimming pool. But NOT what the Council is giving them now – they wanted a 50m, Olympic size pool.

Well, the dreams of the City of Oxford Swimming Club is about to become a reality. But not in Oxford. Didcot has always been considered very much a poor relation to Oxford; not a city, merely a growing together of three villages that became a railway transport hub. And nothing

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of architectural significance compared to the City a few miles away, and nothing of historical significance.

However, what the Didcot council has that puts this Oxford council to shame is a vision; a forward looking response to the growth in housing that will expand the town even further. They are about to build a full, Olympic-size, 50m swimming pool as part of a leisure complex to meet the needs of their public. And, at the same time, listen to the existing users and keep what they have, the Didcot Wave, open as well.

So, what will keen swimmers do in future? If Oxford City Council gets its way, they will remove publicly funded leisure from inside the ring road in East Oxford where people want it, and build a new only 25m non-Olympic pool where there is no evidence of demand. A few miles away, there will be an even newer pool that will be bigger, much bigger. And the pool in Didcot will be more accessible to the 4 x 4s of the 250-strong elite of the Oxford Swimming Club than the smaller pool in Blackbird Leys. So the predictions about overall usage dropping will come true as swimmers who want 50m swimming pool abandon Oxford, leaving the City Council, and us the taxpayers, with a white elephant costing over £13m.

But it could all be so different. The Council can still decide to refurbish and improve both Temple Cowley Leisure Centre, and remember it is not just a competition swimming pool, but also a diving pool, sauna, steam room, gym and exercise studio, and also the existing Blackbird Leys Swimming Pool, for £3m. The choice, your choice, is still there. And if Labour loses three seats in the coming elections it can become a reality.

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