

HANDS UP FOR A NEW BEGINNING

A document prepared on behalf of the Woodgreen Open Air Swimming Pool Support Group to encourage constructive debate.



Compiled by Derrick Knight (MA Oxon) on behalf of the Woodgreen Open Air Pool Group c/o Glyn Tiller, 22 Angus Close, Banbury, OX16 1UQ tel 01295 271093.

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In March 2005 Cherwell District Council's Head of Leisure Services made a feasibility report to his Councillors on the modernisation Council run sports centres in North Oxfordshire. In summary he argued that with only some £17 million of new money to spend on modernisation, there was not money enough to upgrade all four centres in the district so the money would have to be allocated to three, a rebuild of Spiceball Park Sports Centre plus some new building and refurbishment for the Bicester and Kidlington sports centres. In the circumstances the troubled Woodgreen Open Air Pool would have to be sacrificed. There were questions about what to do with the rest of the Woodgreen site.

The Open Air Pool had been a popular amenity for the local community from its grand opening in 1939 right through until 1997. In that year there began a series of well-intentioned but ineffective refurbishments that were wrongly conceived, incompetently carried out, given over to the under-trained staff of an arms length private leisure company. CDC who made the contract with this company were unable or unwilling to exercise close supervision and the company was allowed to cut costs in services and staff. The machinery of the pool coughed and spluttered, the quality of the water upset the swimmers, the lining of the pool peeled off. The insurers shook their heads and the Health and Safety officers of the Council hastened to close it down. None of these problems need have occurred if good intentions had been supported by wise counsel and a high standard of work. How else can one explain that for nearly forty years the pool had run and given pleasure without trouble. Now it must have seemed to the responsible council officers and their political masters that there was no credit left to them whatever they decided. They saw Woodgreen as an albatross around their necks and openly or secretly longed to get rid of it.

We in the Support Group on the other hand were puzzled by the proposal to rebuild Spiceball from scratch in another and supposedly safer place. The CDC feasibility study speaks of 'the need to address the flooding liability associated with Spiceball. Since this is argued not to be possible on the existing site, it follows that Spiceball must be rebuilt on higher ground. There is indeed a small 'island' on the far side of the River Cherwell in the angle created by the exit road from town next to the bus station and the new road linking it to Castle Street. The CDC proposal seems to show that a bigger and better Spiceball can be built here. Direct observation questions that. It puts the new building bang alongside two main roads with all the noise, vibration and exhaust emissions that follow. There is also question as to the quality of the site that is said to be an old landfill and may be unstable as well as toxic.

If the strongest reason for a re-location and rebuild is now the risk of flood damage one might well ask this was not also the case when the existing building was put up in the lowest and most vulnerable part of the flood plain. At that time the risk of flooding was higher than it is now. As far as the Association of British Insurers (ABI) is concerned that segment of the River Cherwell has always been categorised as having a significant risk of flooding with a chance of flooding greater than 1 in 75 and attracting the highest rates of insurance. Why then has panic apparently only now set in about a building that has been financially vulnerable throughout its existence and yet has provided excellent leisure facilities to the town for all those years and only twice been damaged by a rare flood. Since the insurance affected must only be that amount concerned with structural damage from flooding, why is it not possible to set aside a contingency sum to cover an unlikely flood rather than spend over £10 million

on a rebuild that is unnecessary and would cause major disruption in the centre of Banbury for years to come. In the interim, huge sums have been spent by the Environmental Agency on flood prevention works that make the risk of flooding even more unlikely. A fraction of that money would allow for complete overhaul of the Woodgreen swimming pool together with an upgrade of all the facilities around it plus a provision for a generous annual allowance to make good the possible deficit in income if part of the summer season was hit by bad weather. It is not as if the new Spiceball will have a wealth of new amenities. The swimming pool will be smaller. Two of the Squash Courts will go and other facilities modified, not always for the better. The argument that it will be better for Banbury to have one improved swimming pool all the year round rather than split its resources between one indoor and one outdoor pool is a delusion.

When rumours of these plans became known to the public in March 2005 there was a huge public outcry – from the Open Air Pool Support Group that had been part of a consortium running the pool in earlier years, from local councillors of all parties and by local people for whom the outdoor pool was a well loved asset and of enormous benefit to the community. Any testing of opinion by the council itself had showed that Woodgreen was a very popular facility. Our own lobbying showed that it was high on the wish list of thousands of town dwellers as well as those in villages within a twenty mile radius. The CDC feasibility study admitted that no comparative costings had been made nor had any attempt to explore new technical advances that might overcome the plant failures that had shut down Woodgreen. One of the purposes of this report is to highlight such advances. New technology can banish past problems.

There was another reason for bringing the outdoor pool back to life. It lay in the origin of the pool through a gift made by its founder. It was highlighted in April 2005 when the present day members of the Gillett family made public the covenants agreed between their ancestor, the Banbury banker and philanthropist Joseph Ashley Gillett and the then Banbury Town Council, by which he made a free gift of land off Park Road in Neithrop for the construction of an outdoor swimming pool for the enjoyment and health of the people of Banbury. The terms of the covenant were precise. The land was granted on condition it was used -----*‘for the purpose of constructing and maintaining thereon a swimming pool and buildings and structures and equipment incidental to the use of a swimming pool to be used by the public for bathing and swimming facilities and no other recreation or amusement....’*

The Open Air Pool Support Group has supported the Gillett descendants who are insistent that the reported plans for permanent closure were in breach of the covenant that was still legally running and morally offensive to the citizens of the town to whom the land had been given. Even though the administration of the town council had been swallowed up into Cherwell District Council, the gift had until recently been respected by it and even referred to in the leases of new houses built around the Woodgreen centre. Now it seemed that elements within CDC were prepared to ignore it. The Pool Group were quite clear that this would be a dreadful blow to a tradition of benevolent gifts by distinguished local personalities both here and elsewhere and furthermore that it might be argued in court to be illegal. If it ever came to a last ditch struggle to defend the covenant, the Pool Group were determined to seek legal redress even though this was a dismal and expensive prospect with political implications.

It is the objective of the Pool Group to look forward to a new beginning for the pool. In April 2005 when the new Banbury Town Council voted unanimously to explore the possibility of taking back the ownership and responsibility of Woodgreen if a fair financial arrangement could be reached, the Pool Group was glad to co-operate in its initiative while remaining somewhat sceptical about the budgetary goodwill of CDC and its determination to push through its own agenda. **The Support Group now offers the results of its own thoughts on the future of the pool.** It is convinced that it should be re-opened as soon as possible to meet local community needs that are not met by a presently overcrowded Spiceball Leisure Centre or will be met by the new centre that is planned. The Group insists that, as hinted in the March report of the Head of Leisure services, any survey of the local community will show a solid backing for the re-opening of the outdoor pool.

Members of the Open Air Pool Group have done their own researches. These have not had the benefit of computer models of design or of financial implications but have discovered that there are available today technical solutions for the renewal of the pool that would not cost a fortune, would remove all the health and safety fears, would simplify maintenance and ensure long term trouble free usage, be adaptable to modification at a later date such as the add-on of a retractable roof, or the installation of solar energy cells on the vast roof of the indoor bowling green that would reduce heating costs.

We have asked two companies with great experience of the latest innovations in public swimming pool construction to provide information that enables us to weigh up several positive options that fit the needs of Woodgreen.

We have also contacted a company in the USA who have become expert in the design of poly-steel temporary or semi-permanent shelters for large areas. Another company using the latest technology offers inflatable composite structures supported on air-beams. Both companies have been motivated to solve the problems of shelter for equipment or personnel in different overseas territories and are now applying their technology to civil purposes. These ideas are worth exploring.

Proposals for the refurbishment of the pool

We make several assumptions.

- 1 The pool needs to be completely relined. The surroundings need refurbishing if not redesigning.
2. The piping, filtration, pumping equipment and technical monitoring systems will need to be replaced by the best up to date gear. It may be the case that parts of the equipment have some life left but that it is not worth the risk of breakdowns in the next few years for the sake of small economies. We need a pool that is technologically sound for the long term and as maintenance free as possible.
3. The facility is a leisure AND a pleasure area. This is not necessarily the ethos of the Spiceball Leisure Centre that has become much more of a health centre in recent years. Woodgreen should be available both to serious swimmers and as a magnet for leisure swimmers and families with youngsters coming to have a good time.

It should be heated and offer extras – a robust paddling pool, a diving board, a flume, a pleasant picnic area, a good café.

4. Thought needs to be given to having more changing rooms and lockers.

This is what the pool looks like at the present time. One photo has been taken from the north end and one from the south.

A common sense reading of the current state of the pool, that has been empty and open to the elements for several years without being used, is that it is beyond repair. The equipment is out of date. The lining of the pool is damaged.



And now for something new.

This is the newly lined swimming pool at Parliament Hill Fields North London that first opened in 1938 and has recently been relined using a stainless steel tank.

Company X has recently completed a complete refurbishment of the Parliament Hill Lido for the Corporation of London. This open air pool is not heated and is open all the year round. It has always been and still is very popular. Bigger than the Woodgreen pool (210ftX 90ft) and attracts up to 3000 visitors a day in the summer season. It has a welded stainless steel tank with a dimpled surface that is more hygienic than any other system and eliminates the need for maintenance and grouting. The pool is filled to the level of the deck and white grills draw off the scum into channels that prevent any overflow onto the deck surrounds.



This is what it looks like.



The Corporation of London's design team considered two options

- (a) Stainless steel lining.
- (b) Tiled reinforced concrete

Documents from the Corporation of London indicate that its decision was swayed

because the stainless steel liner had a shorter on-site period of erection, lasting water tightness and low maintenance costs. Another factor was that the stainless steel lining could better accommodate small movements in the original pool along the existing crack lines. Some ground movement was expected in the future. The decision makers had seen other pools and were also taken with the crisp and clean appearance of those pools, even those that had been open a long time.



Costs of Parliament Hill Lido Refurbishment

The cost of re-lining the pool	£810,000
Upgrading all technical systems and repairing drainage systems	£663,000
Relaying pool surround etc, replacing paddling pool, building repairs	£470,000

There were additional staff costs and fees.

Work began in November 2004 and was completed in April 2005.

Visit by Company X to Banbury

(Note. We are concealing the names of the companies involved in case public reporting of this paper might later prejudice any possible tender.)

We asked the company who carried out the contract for the Corporation of London to come down to Banbury and give us an estimate for our own pool without any commitment or cost. We organised a visit agreed with the Head of CDC Leisure Services. Its technical director made an inspection and sent us a quote.

Here is a summary of what he told us.

Delivery and installation of the stainless steel liner, overflow channels and drainage

Estimate £500,000.

The costs of the liner would fall if the profile of the pool at the deep end were simplified.

The costs of supplying and installing new water and chemical systems were not provided but extrapolating the figures from the London costs and other sources:

Estimate 250,000

Remedial work by a general ground works contractor to fill in the existing scum channel and all general excavation works, pipe relaying unloading of material, laying of new paving etc .by others. There would also be a need for weather protection across the whole pool with heating if the work is in the winter. (Welders cannot weld in the rain or wind).

No estimate.

Other costs are likely to be common to whichever pool lining solution is chosen.

Installation time 5 months

Quotation by Company B.

Company B is smaller than Company A but has a distinguished record of swimming pool refurbishing, including new pools for local authorities. It has a partnership with one of the best water installation companies in the country. It uses more traditional methods of installing pools but uses the latest techniques to produce better results.

Its director also agreed to give us a cost analysis for Woodgreen that is based on a modern method of reinforced concrete with a glazed tile finish.

This is an example of one of its completed indoor pools.



This is what they told us.

The cost of a refurbishment which would entail repair, replacement areas of rendering, waterproof tank system, followed by complete tiling, conversion to level deck system with perimeter; gully and grilles, complete with all new circulation pipework, filtration, dosing equipment, pumping etc

Estimate £500,000

As an alternative, if it turns out on close inspection that the pool shell was not good enough for refurbishment, then a complete new pool structure could be constructed within the existing pool using sprayed concrete techniques and finishing with tiles. This would entail a small reduction of the dimension of the pool but if 50 metres was a key concern the shallow end might easily be extended the extra foot to compensate for any loss. The cost of this including all the other items in the above would be

Estimate £750,000

Of course we will share with Banbury Council Working Committee members the names of the companies we have consulted as long as we are assured that it will not be seen as breaking any tendering regulations. We believe that either of the two options are attractive and would provide a long lasting physical solution to the Woodgreen pool problem and provide a magnet for all kinds of other water sports.

It is instructive to compare these costs with those published in the March 29 2005 CDC feasibility document on Woodgreen quoted above.

	Bowls		Open Air Pool		Estimated Capital Cost £'000	Estimated Revenue Cost £'000
	Operation	Facility	Operation	Facility		
1	Independent	Modernisation	Closure	Demolish	1,020	20 (possible one off)
2	CDC Contract	Modernisation	CDC Contract	Extreme Dry Sports	3,900	71
3	CDC Contract	Minor Improvement	Closure	Demolish	200	130+
4	CDC Contract	Modernisation	CDC Contract	Refurbish	1,500	150+
5	Independent	Minor Improvement	CDC Contract	Refurbish	500	70 first year up to 50 second
6	Independent	Minor Improvement	Independent	Refurbish	500	50 first year up to 40 second
7	Independent	Minor Improvement	Independent	Non Public Swimming & refurbishment	500	40 (one off)
8	Independent	Minor Improvement	Independent	Outdoor Bowls Green	300	30 (one off)
9	To be transferred to another organisation such as the Town Council.					

We cannot speak on behalf of other stakeholders in the Woodgreen Community Centre. They should say how they see their future and what changes they would like at the centre so that the local community that is youthful and growing can benefit from it. It seems questionable that such a large space as the Indoor Bowling Green is at present reserved exclusively for some 300 members of the Bowling Club who only clock up some 9000 paying visits a year compared with an average of 50,000 visits to the pool before it was privatised in 1992. It is surprising to us today that no multiple use of the space was implemented when it was built. Other centres have temporary professionally laid floors. There are so many community based activities that could flourish in that space in the summer when the bowlers play outdoors .

There are one or two further issues that keep surfacing in discussions. The amenities of the pool must be able to serve a large number of customers during the high season, otherwise the entrants have to be restricted and this has a negative effect on potential revenue. At present the changing rooms and locker facilities are inadequate because a large number were culled in earlier years to make room for the bowling club.

The area around the pool needs to be made more user friendly. A well run café would be one item and the replacement of the steel fence by a tall brick wall that could be rendered on the inside as a surface for a decorative frieze would be another.

It is essential that a dedicated and 'hands on' management team be employed. Past bitter experience has been that the arms length component in the management of the pool has been grossly inadequate. A real and continual effort is needed for pool promotion amongst all ages and interests in the community. Good and committed management is crucial to its success. The Pool Group would support it.

The Pool Support Group should be invited to provide volunteer back-up, assist in the running of special events, engage in fund raising for special equipment. All its supporters should be seen as the active guardian angels of the pool's progress.

Car Parking will be a problem because old provisions have been shaved as new buildings have been built on the fringes of the Centre. It would be most useful if a modest fee were charged available to the pool as part of its income. This could make a real difference to its yearly income as it has done with other lidos. It might be unpopular in some quarters but the principle is accepted all over town and ought to be considered.

Of course not only the young benefit from a swim. A longer living generation also needs the pool for continuing health and exercise. Amongst our members are many who swam regularly in the pool before its closure and would do so again. The need for the pool spreads across all the generations living in Banbury and not only here but in all the villages around. This is what our petition signers have told us. We believe that either of the two rebuilding proposals described above remove all the health and safety fears, resolve all the technical failures of the past years, and open up new possibilities for leisure in North Oxfordshire. Of course money is important but the return on having an attractive and well-run open air pool even for a summer season is immeasurable. We look to our councillors to continue to support the call for the reopening of the pool and to wrestle with the financial problems until they have found a positive solution.

We also have a dream that our pool with its rare size might have tremendous value for training swimmers in the run up to the 2012 Olympics as well as satisfying the many new swimmers who will be enthused by that event and want to become better ones. There are very few 50 metre pools in the country. Woodgreen might become a precious training pool for that event and in so doing spin more prestige and more trade into the town. Then it would really be a centre of excellence and pride to the town.



End. October 7th 2005.