

# **FACTS & QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROPOSED DEMOLITION & REBUILD OF THE VICTORIA BATHS**

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

- The Council intends to close the current building on April 1<sup>st</sup> despite overwhelming local opposition.
- Plans have now been submitted and will take between 10 and 14 weeks to be considered. The Victoria Leisure Centre stands in a conservation zone and these development plans will need both local and Government approval. It could be many months before such plans are approved, and they may even have to be re-drawn if they prove to be unpopular - this is the nature of the planning process in England. In the meantime, where will the local community go?
- The Council intends to demolish almost all of the building, destroying the Turkish Baths, flattening the sports hall and filling in the existing pools. Then they want to dig another pool in an area of the site where no pool has ever been dug before, an area which is wrought through with ancient excavations. This is likely to extend any construction period and the amount of time the area will be without a pool.
- Taking this into account along with potential planning delays and local people may be left without a leisure centre for 3 years. That is a long time in the life of a child who wants to learn to swim.
- If the current centre shuts and (as is likely) the project to demolish and rebuild it runs into problems, the disused building will become derelict and will be condemned.
- The Council voted on April 21<sup>st</sup> last year to explicitly continue funding the running costs of the Victoria Leisure Centre until March 2011. They have now decided that they can save money, (£325,000 in the forthcoming financial year as identified in the Medium Term Financial Plan on Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> 09) by closing the Centre on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2010. The Campaign believes this is what has prompted the Council so act so quickly and without any warning to the community.
- The Council has systematically under-invested in the Victoria Leisure Centre since the early 1990s. During that time, a vast amount of money has been spent on other leisure centres around the city.

## **WHAT HAVE PEOPLE ASKED FOR?**

- The majority of people do not want to see the old centre demolished and rebuilt to make a new facility. In the Council's "Tell Us Your Views" consultation in Feb/Mar 08, **80%** wished to keep the existing facilities (the report says "Many see the VLC as an iconic building for the Sneinton Market area and are keen that its form as an historic building is not lost to the City and the immediate area").
- In the Council commissioned TANC report to see how people wanted a new Leisure Centre to look, **93%** of those surveyed said they would rather see Nottingham City Council put the money they promised into making VLC better, rather than building a new Leisure Centre somewhere else (Question 4); and when asked, 'What bits of VLC building would you like to see kept?', the top 5 responses (in order of popularity) were: all of the building; Swimming pools; Clock tower; Turkish baths; Sports Hall (Question 5).
- In the consultation held by Save Victoria Baths in Nov 08, **92%** agreed with the statement, "I want Victoria Baths to be done up. This would save some of the best bits of the building while making it more modern". Only 7% agreed with the statement, "I want a new building to be in place of Victoria Baths. This would give a purpose-built building, all new."
- In the consultation held in Jan 09 to choose the design options, a clear majority of **61%** chose Option A, which retained almost all of the building & facilities, with the proviso that the Sports Hall be retained (only 15% chose Option C, the Council's preferred option).

- The Council's only statistical base for their actions are the views of school children hurriedly canvassed in March last year when the Council realised most people in the local area did not back their scheme.
- The majority consulted want the current building, with its fantastic, unique and broad range of facilities retained but modernised. It is what the community has been asking for since 1998. The Council's own research bears this out.

### **WHAT DOES THE COUNCIL'S NEW CENTRE OFFER?**

- The proposed new centre offers a 25m pool, a splash pool, a gym, a café and a sauna. This means it will have fewer facilities than the current one. The proposed new centre has no Turkish, no badminton courts, no sports hall and 40% less swimming space. For a fraction of the £9million price tag, the Council could bring the existing one up to state-of-the-art, modern standards. Shockingly, the £1.3 million price tag that the Council claimed in 2008 it would take just to make essential repairs to the existing building actually contained costings for an almost complete refurbishment. It chose not to reveal this information until threatened with a Freedom of Information request.
- The Council's vision of a new Victoria Leisure Centre means knocking down the Turkish Baths, one of the few remaining functioning Turkish Baths in the country, and the sports hall beloved of badminton clubs across Nottinghamshire and which features architecturally significant iron girders. Neither of these unique facilities will be replaced.

### **WHAT DOES THE CURRENT CENTRE OFFER?**

- Despite its state of disrepair, the current centre is both cost effective, well attended and held in high regard by its users. In the last year it cost £405,000 to run; by comparison the Council expects the new smaller facility to cost £537,00 in its first year - 25% more.
- Figures drawn from Overview and Scrutiny Committee Scrutiny of Eversheds/APSE Leisure Centres Capitalisation Options Report 2004 (the most current, publicly available figures) show that with an annual attendance of 215,491 costing an average of £1.99 per visit, the VLC is better attended than Beechdale, Ken Martin, Portland or John Carroll, and is cheaper per visit than Southglade, Beechdale, Noel St, Portland and John Carroll.
- Most interesting is the finding from the TANC Report of 2008 which showed that in response to the question, 'What would make you use the VLC more?' **62%** said improved management (especially different activities, extended opening, cheaper, cleaner, better publicised). Only a third said *improved facilities* and only 3% said *new facilities*.
- These valuable social and economic assets could be successfully used to regenerate the area and improve the health of the community at a modest cost to the taxpayer; but they are needlessly put at risk by the Council's intention to close the centre and replace it with a smaller one that does not offer the same unique facilities, at a colossal price of £9 million. For **less** money, they can afford to bring what is already there up to 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. This would keep both pools, the Turkish, sauna, gym and the sports hall.
- Design Option A (to modernise existing facilities) is the only one that is consistent with the Council's own Carbon targets. It would seem that refurbishing a HOUSE results in 35 tons less CO2 (the same carbon emissions as flying to Australia and back 10 times) than building a new one so the amount of carbon saved by keeping as much of the building as possible would be immense, compared to the savings made by energy efficiency in the new-build of Option C. Furthermore, Option C will have a 10 year life span, at which point it will have to be rebuilt, incurring more carbon. By comparison, the Centre has stood for 150 years and is still structurally sound.

## **WHICH DESIGN OPTION GIVES US THE LEAST AMOUNT OF TIME WITHOUT A LEISURE CENTRE?**

- The Council's new scheme involves demolition of most of the building before construction can begin. As mentioned earlier this is fraught with risk. In contrast, modernizing what is already there could take place in phases, allowing the Centre to remain open during construction.
- It is vital to keep a functioning Leisure Centre open for as long as possible. During the 2008 Tell Us Your Views consultation, 95% did not wish to see the closure of the facility and the majority of respondents did not know what other facility they would use; nearly a third of all respondents would not use any other facility. Other anecdotal evidence collected at the large public rally (March 08) brought up the fact that it is difficult to see how local residents will be persuaded to travel over to the Meadows or Radford, given the current and well documented climate of antagonism between these communities. At the well-documented public meeting held on Sat 1<sup>st</sup> March, mothers from the area spoke movingly of their fears for their children because of the this issue.
- St Anns is rated by the Government as being in the worst 10% areas in England for health, crime and poverty. St. Anns alone has one of highest incidences of cancer and heart disease deaths in the city. There is a 10% more chance of being obese in St Anns than the wealthier wards of the city. There is a 13-year gap in life expectancy for men living in the most affluent (Wollaton West) and deprived wards in Nottingham (St. Ann's) and a 10-year gap for women.
- The VLC is situated such that people from Sherwood, Carlton, Mapperly, St Anns and Sneinton can all access it via one bus journey. That is not be true of alternative leisure centres and will act a significant disincentive to people to take exercise

## **WHY SHOULD YOU QUESTION WHAT THE COUNCIL ARE DOING?**

There appears to be no rational justification for the Council's actions: the proposed new building has not been asked for, it is not cost effective, it offers fewer facilities to an area of chronic poor health; its construction does not address the underlying problem of poor leisure management in the area; and its design is likely to result in a poor quality building simply because of the physical and planning restrictions of the area where it will sit. Moreover the Council's decision goes against simple common sense.

The Council were not elected to demolish the Victoria Leisure Centre and have no mandate to do so. The current administration was elected by a small turn out of the vote. In this context, democracy can only thrive through active and sincere engagement with the people. The closure of the Victoria Leisure Centre has prompted one of the most widespread and engaged campaigns of this Council's term of office, buttressed by extensive surveys and invoking the involvement of thousands of people. Few other City issues have aroused so much political involvement.

Yet the Council has tried every trick in the book to marginalise those whose views they disagree with. They gave the community just four weeks to respond to their decision to close the VLC on cost grounds, despite the fact (now known) that all along they could afford to refurbish it. Once the campaign was underway, the Leader of the Council (who is Councillor for the St Annes area) did not bother to turn up to the mass rallies to listen to his constituents. When the public opinion forced a retreat by the Council, the Council set up a Working Group, where meetings went un-minuted and where the arguments won by the Campaign and its supporters round the table were ignored by the Council. Finally, the Council presented the public with a 'Buggin's choice' of new leisure centres and even when people (in good faith) expressed a preference for the least of the 3 evils, the Council ignored them.