

“A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk, Along the briny beach” Govanhill Baths Trust

Govanhill Baths was effectively closed by Glasgow City Council on 29th March 2001, against the wishes of the unconsulted local community—the majority of users of this long essential service on their doorstep. Glasgow’s ‘Govanhill Pool: Southside Against Closure’, the community protest group, undertook their own detailed survey to assess the impact. The study was damning. It revealed that six months on 55% of former users had not used other swimming facilities; those most affected being retired people (75%), the unemployed (77%), the sick or disabled or not fit for work (68.7%), and the Indian/Pakistani community (90%)—the enclosed Edwardian style pool has been identified in a SportScotland study on ‘Ethnic Minorities and Sport’ as a Best Practice example of breaking down barriers to participation in sport as the Baths’ enclosed facilities provides privacy and permits segregated swimming for men and women. To top it all, Govanhill Baths lies in the unhealthiest constituency in Britain and yet the health impact of the closure on the local community was not even considered by the Council, who seem to be insistent on a policy of taking fitness facilities out of local communities and centralising them for car users—73% of households in Govanhill do not have a car according to a Community Scotland Study.

Only due to the commitment and ingenuity of the local community does Glasgow City Council still have the opportunity to go some way to redeeming itself. Variant met up with Fatima Uygun, formerly of Southside Against Closure, to catch up on the latest developments with Govanhill Baths.

We received a phone call from the *Evening Times* saying, ‘Do you know there’s a special meeting called by Glasgow City Council Culture & Leisure Services Department, it’s not on the listed meetings for the year, and the only thing on the agenda is the pool—it’s to be decided whether or not it’s surplus to requirements for that Department.’? We panicked. We couldn’t make the meeting, and of course it was to be declared surplus. So the Baths have now gone to Development and Regeneration Services—just sitting there.

The Dixon Centre is basically an old age care home, and it put in an expression of interest for the Baths and had a feasibility study done, paid for by the Govanhill Housing Association, to use the building for a new day care facility. This would mean demolishing the building and having a ‘new build’.

Something that’s gone in our favour is that Historic Scotland has said that the pool and façade have to be retained—but what the Dixon Centre can do is record the pool and concrete over it for possible future use. On finding this out, a number of people deluged them saying, ‘What are you doing, this is outrageous!’ They have now backtracked a bit and have said over the phone that if the community want a another use for it they will not intervene, but it looks like the Govanhill Community Development Trust¹ are very keen on pursuing the Dixon Centre’s interest in the Baths’ site.

We found out one possible reason for this enthusiasm from a Community Council meeting at Crosshill / Govanhill which GCDT happened to attend—a fluke. GCDT argued that once upon a time they were actually considering using the former Royal Samaritan Hospital—which they’ve already developed and sold off mostly as private housing—for their facility but somehow decided against it. It didn’t work out—basically it sounded like they’d sold the property off and there wasn’t enough property left for their own use.² We presume as a result they’re very keen to develop the

Baths, as quickly as possible. I didn’t realise how much Govanhill Housing Association were so proactive in the regeneration of the area.

Also, the Larkfield bus depot is seeking permission for 400 to 600 proposed housing to go on the site, it’s being moved further out—we just saw the plans for this massive concentration of housing. We’re asking the Community Council—even if they do object it’s going to go ahead anyway—that they should write to the developers and the Council to say ‘You’re having all these houses built, we can’t stop you, as part of your social responsibility will you commission a feasibility study into the pool for the Govanhill Baths Trust.’

We’ve just set up the Govanhill Baths Trust and Govanhill / Crosshill, Battlefield, and Strathbungo / Shawlands Community Councils are all going to endorse a public meeting where we’re going to elect the first board of trustees. I’m still very upset that Glasgow City Council are not going to have a publicly run leisure facility, but to save the building this is what we’ve been forced to do.

We had a meeting with Development & Regeneration Services before Govanhill Baths was declared ‘surplus to requirements’. Gill Wright from the Manchester Victoria Baths—that won the Restoration BBC TV programme—has been a supporter of the campaign to save the pool from the outset and she came to the meeting, which impressed them. Basically we were told: ‘Get something in. Get architects to have a look at it. Just do it’. He said he had a number of architects in mind that we could consider—we’ve e-mailed and e-mailed and he hasn’t sent a list. So, we’re desperately looking for architects—we’ve got two companies we’re thinking of, Assist is one who do some degree of free community work. Basically we want to sit with some architects who’ll do it for free—I’m sure there’s some good architects about, we just have to find them.

We’ve actually said to the Dixon Centre, we will work with you, the Baths building is vast, why can’t it be shared? Apparently they want something much bigger—they’re not interested in saving any Baths or pool facilities. We’re also going to have a meeting with the GCDT to see if they can see us and give a free feasibility study—like they did for the Dixon Centre—into the pool.

There were good things during the *Glasgow Govanhill Pool: Southside Against Closure Pool Campaign*—the Health Board said it would donate a new boiler if we could convert one of the pools into a hydrotherapy unit. This is our dream—we want a functioning healthy living centre. So we’re going to reapproach some of these organisations.

We contacted the London Pools Campaign. This campaign is liaising with all the pools in London which are being demolished—each year in London at least one pool closes, this year Charlton Lido has closed, Northolt Swimarama will close in the autumn and Ladywell Pool has announced its closure. It’s something atrocious. There is a pool in London that’s actually shut and falling to bits but they’re waiting until the end of the London



bid for the Olympics before they actually demolish it, because you can’t really bid for the Games if you’re demolishing existing infrastructure. Their website (www.londonpoolscampaign.com/) is very good. We received messages of support from Columbia, Queensland, all places... and photographs of similar demonstrations around pools and the community, or bathing areas like public beaches, that were being shut down. It was really great, we felt part of something, rather than marginalised in Govanhill in Glasgow. We’re going to try and set up a UK Pools conference to get everyone together for some united action, and they’re going to help us get our web site up and running again. We’re also in touch with a couple of other pools that have become community trusts. So it’s all go.

We had a meeting with Glasgow Building Preservation Trust—who saved the Tron. They encouraged us to write directly to Charlie Gordon the leader of the Council. So we wrote to him saying we’re a new organisation determined to save the Baths and put them back into community use, we would like your support and would like to work with the Council in any way possible to assist us in this venture—nothing so far, but at least we’ve done it and can follow it up. There are some Councillors in the area that are very supportive, and most of the list MSPs in the area are supportive. So we’re optimistic about getting something done, it’s just a case of getting people on board.

We’re having another meeting with Development & Regeneration Services—though I think they’re keen to push through with the proposal from the Dixon Centre. At least the Crosshill / Govanhill Community Council is absolutely opposed to the Dixon Centre being located in the pool. It objects to any community facility being used for another community facility simply because of the shortage of land and stuff the council have mucked up. It’s interesting what the Govanhill Community Development Trust is actually doing. Their remit of ‘regeneration’ is ‘sustainable community enterprises’—sustainable is just another word for private. They keep talking about bringing in business units and all this, while Govanhill is awash with empty buildings that don’t end up coming to anything.³ But I think they want to attract a much more gentrified clientele. We’re worried—as you know, the area’s becoming quite gentrified. There’s a major push to have big posh housing in the area. If you look at any brochure the main push is right near the Hidden Gardens development.⁴

Another issue is the old Shell garage on Darnley road has been shut down and sold for private housing development. By all means have artists studios, cheap areas where people can come, community centres and so on, but I don’t think that’s what GCDT are interested in. I have nothing against new development as long as it’s not going to take away from facilities and units and businesses that already exist. There are a couple of churches at the moment have had feasibility studies done to convert them into different facilities, what they are at the moment we don’t know.

Archie Graham, the local Councillor for the area of Shawlands / Strathbungo, has not objected to one housing development in the last five years—he used to be on our Community Council, but doesn’t turn up any more—at the same time



community facilities are being shut down. The Council will argue, 'Look at all this regeneration happening in the area.' There is the odd cafe opening up but that only looks like regeneration when you look at the devastation immediately before it when they built the one way road system through Govanhill that shut dozens of businesses down. The fact that one has reopened is not an endorsement of the whole approach.

What distresses me the most is that somehow the argument over the public subsidy of private business has crept in and been won. In the community people are led to believe that the council, the government, don't have any money and we have to do this. More and more doubt is being cast on these Public Private Projects—recently, for example, Fife abandoned such a school building scheme and even the government's Audit watchdog has cast serious doubt on the long term efficiency of the scheme in terms of debt being accrued for the tax payer. Getting into bed with big business was once something of a slur, now the meetings that go on with private companies in Glasgow is astounding.

So Govanhill Baths Trust's next move is to have a public meeting and we've got to start our press push. There was a great article in the *Guardian* at the start of the Olympics on the state of pools in the UK—we've one swimmer from Glasgow—and they mentioned Govanhill pool campaign. The other thing is Manchester pools that won the restoration programme received £3.8m with £1 million of this in donations from ordinary people, so we'd like to do something like that. We're determined to keep the cost of a swim affordable for all the community.

What's great about living in Govanhill is that if we'd been situated anywhere else we would have lost the Baths long ago. I think that just from circumstance, previous experience and people having had enough has all added up to quite a militant little area. So hopefully we can build and

get our pool back for the local community and its many other users. There's great support but there isn't actually a guidebook which says you're at this stage in your campaign and this is how to set up a trust, it's all about learning. There's a lot of people willing to do that, for sure.

Breaking news

Since Govanhill Baths Trust's last meeting with Regeneration and Development Services, they have let them know that they are very keen to push through with the proposal from the Dixon Centre, and that at present they would not be looking at any other options!

If there are any architects / planners interested in assisting with the campaign, please contact Govanhill Baths Trust on: 07779995483.

"United we will swim!"

Notes

1. A subsidiary of Govanhill Housing Association, Govanhill Community Development Trust (GCDT) was set up to "develop initiatives in areas other than housing" which, in the rhetoric of regeneration, "contribute to the social and economic development of Govanhill". This includes: "Workspace management and development" (ie. private business units) and "Community Regeneration" (amongst other things, both establishing and working with/through a Residents Group, a Careers Fair, and curiously with support from Glasgow City Council the purchasing of a 'green machine' street cleaner to improve the local environment; "Managed day to day by the council, it targets the streets most affected by litter and dog mess.")
2. According to GCDT's web site, the initial conversion of the former Royal Samaritan Hospital was to provide 30 housing units for sale and 13 for rent—valued at £3.5 million. The project was funded by Communities Scotland, the Executive's housing and regeneration agency, Govanhill Housing Association and Govanhill Community Development Trust, Scottish Enterprise,
3. The Sunday Herald, 29/8/04, also casts doubt over the health of Glasgow's office market "as a mass of space...competes for a small number of prospective tenants." With rents being squeezed as "a small number of prospective tenants have their pick of a flood of new developments."
4. The Hidden Gardens are situated just behind the Tramway Theatre, according to their website they are "Scotland's first permanent public garden for the 21st century and a visionary new landmark for Scotland...the result of a two year consultation and design process that have seen the transformation of a derelict industrial site on Glasgow's south side into a tranquil and inspirational haven." Clearly, the unravelling history of arts funding spearheading private property development in Glasgow needs to be thoroughly investigated.



Strathclyde European Partnership. But in addition, there is to be the conversion of the former Hospital's Block F to an Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Centre, including new office accommodation for the Association, Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Centre and new offices for Govanhill Housing Association, Govanhill Community Development Trust, Govanhill Local Housing Organisation and the Govanhill Social Inclusion Project—valued at: £3.1 million. The funders are broken down as: Communities Scotland Wider Role Funding, Govanhill Housing Association along with Govanhill Community Development Trust, European Regional Development Fund, Scottish Enterprise Glasgow.