

## **Multi-use Community Sports Ground**

### **The proposer: Jon Brindle**

I have spent 60 years living in Hatfield, attending my schools here. I have played a lot of football and run or coached adult, youth and school teams. I once led a community group which achieved planning permission for a local football ground and I played a leading role in the Town Council's Working Party in which I compiled a feasibility study for a ground at Birchwood in 2016.

### **Why Hatfield needs a football ground**

Hatfield used to have six grounds to accommodate its senior teams – all replete with social clubs. But by 1985 five had gone, largely replaced by other development. When the aircraft factory closed its sports ground in 2001 there was only local authority parks left; but these parks were not up to the required FA standards to allow our one remaining club to play even at the modest levels once enjoyed, forcing them to play out of town before folding.

Our top three clubs are now all in the Herts County League, which is the lowest tier of senior football and mainly comprised of village sides. Whilst Hatfield has a population of 40,000 we have nothing at the heart of our community anymore. Apart from losing our football grounds and 28 pitches, we've lost our local Sunday League which had 60 teams in the late 1990s. We had three cricket pitches too, but now all are gone. Our 750 seat Forum Theatre was demolished in 1997 and not replaced. The University is ever more distant as a community partner. No employer now provides a social club that support a host of pastoral activities for its members and their families. Our once thriving town centre is dismal - and the market too. Our youth clubs are a shadow of what they once were, and our town twinning with Zierikzee in Holland ended several years ago. Our senior citizens have recently lost Friendship House as a meeting place, and the pandemic lockdowns have further marginalised already lonely people who are also local taxpayers. What is there for them? Are we now strangers in a town lacking identity?

### **Opportunity knocks**

In 2006 there was hope when a football ground – also designed to support cricket or rugby - won planning permission to construct facilities on community playing fields at Angerland Common in South Hatfield. But the expected peppercorn lease was not forthcoming and planning permission expired in 2011. Its University landlords closed those 20 acre playing fields and never reopened them, but eventually paid £1.4 million 'compensation' to the Borough Council to hold in Trust **with £800k of it specifically to be used for 'football in Hatfield'**. The remainder of the £1.4m to be spent on other sports in Hatfield. Be in no doubt, this windfall was hard won by community members - not a council. It is effectively the gift of an opportunity for a defined purpose, and it should be used to deliver an inclusive football ground to benefit the greatest number of our residents; not just transient players and teams – some of whom are not even Hatfield people!

### **What is required and why?**

On three occasions in the past two years, I have provided the Town Council with visual presentations which demonstrate an appropriate and workable scheme.

For councillors needing an online refresher, please use this link: <https://bit.ly/BirchwoodGround>

Basically, the ground would be discreetly hidden behind the leisure centre and benefit economically by utilising the existing changing rooms and steel post & rail pitch barrier. But to

provide our teams with a chance for reasonable advancement and to create a little of the ‘wow factor’ necessary to attract supporters to a venue missing here for 36 years, the following facilities are required to make this proposal one that is fit-for-purpose and future-proof. Namely: A new hard-wearing grass pitch to be levelled with a drainage system; floodlights installed; 6 ft wooden fencing and a hedge planted around the pitch for aesthetics and security. Vandal-proof toilet units for ladies, gents and disabled attendees inside the fenced area - on otherwise unusable playing field, to be used instead of those inside the Leisure Centre. A 30ft x 20ft vandal-proof occasional ‘clubhouse’ is required to accommodate up to 100 people and have a bar stocked only on matchdays and other events. The ‘clubhouse’ will remain empty at all other times, save for only the barest, minimal furnishings.

*\*Examples of those facilities can be seen on the above online link.*

It is important to note that historically no Hatfield club has ever had the resources to buy land to create a ground for themselves. Prices are astronomical too as any possible remaining sites are now considered for their future building development potential.

But the Town Council do have amenity land at Birchwood which can be used to enhance its own sports and leisure provision to residents by a relatively modest upgrade to an existing pitch. And Birchwood is by far the best location too for demographics and travel.

### Costs for the scheme

Written quotations were received for all the elements except 1,2,3, 15 & 16 below, which were verbal budgetary costs further to dialogue with suppliers. Most prices were received within the past year, but this year there have been delays affecting the construction industry in the supply and costs of materials due to the covid pandemic causing a downturn in production in China; lockdown issues in the UK; Brexit and the HS2 rail project buying up much of the available stock. Supply matters are expected to have become more settled by the end of the year.

1. Project Manager	£12k est
2. Consultants’ fees	£ 5k est
3. Planning application	£ 16k est
4. Full grass pitch renovation including drainage	£100k
5. Floodlights, installed	£ 45k
6. Services from leisure centre: elec, water, drainage	£ 20k est
7. 6ft wooden fencing, concrete posts & gravelboards	£ 16k
8. Hawthorn hedging saplings along wooden fencing	£ 6k
9. Grandstand: 360 seats, installed (1 of 2 options)	£ 227k
10 Steel open plan vandal proof ‘clubhouse’ inc deliv.	£ 33k
11 Steel ladies toilet block	£ 5k
12 Steel male toilet block	£ 17k
13 Steel disabled toilet block	£ 9k
14 Steel catering block (optional)	£ 10k
15 Tarmaced path – 115m x 1.8m @ £120 per m2	£ 25k est
16 Plastic mesh for extra parking (fitted by HTC)	£ 5k est
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£551k *excl Vat</b>

17 Contingency reserve from £800k fund **£ 249k** (£259k if no catering unit)

\*Vat charged is recoverable

## Maintenance of facilities

### Grandstand:

Clean interior of the stand and seats annually with a pressure washer:	£1,000
Monthly localised cleaning within seating areas by pressure washers 12 months x 4 hours labour @ £20ph.	£1,000
Clean guttering of leaves etc annually:	£ 250

### Floodlights:

Annually clean fittings and check electrical parts:	£1,000
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### Grass pitch:

The new grass pitch will be of a much higher quality than exists now and the council have all necessary equipment.

The existing grass pitch maintenance is already budgeted for, but to keep the new one in prime condition, goalmouths could be re-turfed (approx. 6 x 20 yds) annually.	£2,000
Re-seeding to other areas.	£2,000

### External steel buildings:

Cleaning of toilet blocks and 'clubhouse': 3hrs pw x £15ph x 45 wks	£2,000
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### Sundry works:

*Changing room facilities are already budgeted for.	£ 750
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**Est Total    £10,000**

### Income:

Aside from football, an enclosed ground allows the council to organize a greater variety of outdoor community events as in place will already be seating for 360 plus other necessary facilities to help maximise such things as catering income streams through a bar and the usual snack provisions. Reasonably priced entry fees / ticket sales will control the number of attendees.

	Aprox profit
Currently, teams hiring a pitch at Birchwood pay c£50 per game x 60 games	= £3,000
Bar open at 50 <u>senior</u> games with, say, just 50 spectators spending av £3 on drinks	= £5,000
Catering van - sub out at £30 per match x 50 senior matches?	= £1,500
Bar open at 4 cup finals. Pitch @ £200; catering for 100 attendees: £800 + £1,000	= £1,800
Corporate / private hire games x 6: Pitch @ £200 plus catering @ £100 profit	= £1,800
Youth football tournaments for various age groups over two days. (100s of attendees)	= £4,000
Annual endorsement from a local company eg The Tesco Stadium @ £3,000 pa	= £3,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>£20,100</b>

The above list is a reasonable projection, but profits appear more than enough to cover maintenance costs. However, there will be many other events to stage, particularly in the summer months eg Celebrity soccer matches, School sports days, music concerts, children's shows etc. These could all be good earners. A little marketing and research will generate more ideas for other events to generate income.

### **How would the football ground operate?**

For 12 years Dunstable Town Council have been running a successful scheme at their Creasey Park ground, and it has greatly influenced my proposal further to much detailed and kind support from them. I believe a similar scheme should be implemented at Birchwood too. In a nutshell, Dunstable's two senior clubs groundshare at Creasey Park. The clubs pay to hire the pitch at c£100 per game but can charge admission and keep the proceeds. They can also keep revenue from any pitch-side advertising they have generated by themselves.

Dunstable Town Council have a social bar at the ground, but it is run for the council's own beneficial interest; a similar, but occasional arrangement is proposed here for Birchwood.

### **Artificial 3G pitch or grass pitch**

I strongly advise anyone interested in artificial 3G pitches to spend a few minutes viewing my research findings (abridged) on the following PowerPoint link: <https://bit.ly/Artificial3G>  
It is clear to me that the Town Council should *not* install one for many good reasons.

**Artificial:** **a)** They are not the cash-cow they were, say, ten years ago as more full-sized pitches have been installed locally since. **b)** Four more are planned in the Borough, with two in Hatfield, and all for public use too. **c)** All existing ones are on the site of a school, college, or university. **d)** There are many smaller 5 a-side artificial courts nearby and plenty of available slots which go unused. This indicates there is no great demand for more. *\*See examples on the above link.*

**e)** Artificial pitches are mainly used during peak midweek evening times but they are seldom used during the day. **f)** No Hatfield senior club uses an artificial pitch for their matches despite their availability. **g)** The lack of use by local clubs may be due to 'expensive' hire charges. Accordingly, those wanting one will expect to be subsidized by taxpayers without clubs having any responsibility or commitment. **h)** It costs £50k pa to maintain an artificial 3G pitch – which includes set-aside funds to replace their artificial carpets at c£200k after 10 years. **i)** Constant evening noise and light pollution will upset nearby residents **j)** An overflow carpark will be required on the field or constant parking congestion will be inevitable in residential areas.

**k)** An artificial pitch requires unsightly 14.5 ft high fencing around it.

**Grass pitch:** **a)** A new stadium grass pitch can accommodate 100 matches per season. **b)** A grass pitch will only be used, as now, on weekends during the season plus some Wednesdays and will not upset nearby residents with the problems an artificial pitch creates. **c)** Grass is friendly to the environment, unlike artificial pitches. **d)** Grass is cheaper to maintain.

### **Conclusion:**

In 2006, there was a 6,000 signature petition of residents wanting a football ground in Hatfield, but local people are still waiting for one. A welcoming new ground will become an important amenity for our residents and help to promote our town which is seen as the poor relation to WGC and other Hertfordshire towns. Furthermore, without an aspirational flagship ground, the structuring of local grassroots football is directionless - because it doesn't lead anywhere! Sport England have also seen my scheme and commented favourably as no usable playing field space would be lost and the football ground would be an enhancement to the existing facilities. However, it will be necessary to come to an arrangement with the Charity Commission over a narrow strip of Trust land to allow a grandstand to be erected. But with the benefits a ground will bring to our bereft community, plus the positivity received from Sport England, one wonders why the Commission would not support the project too. Football is our national game, after all. Let us not waste this gift of an opportunity, and let's get it right first time.