

Fit4All

Let's make Mapledurham Playing Fields fit for all without losing land

Stalemate

Mapledurham Playing Fields has been for many years a valued recreational and social hub. The playing fields themselves are very popular, especially with footballers, though more pitches are needed and they need to be properly maintained, with better amenities. Mapledurham Pavilion has been in regular use by community groups but its condition has deteriorated so much over the past 15 years that it has had to be closed.

Reading Borough Council has twice proposed to sell land from the Playing Fields to fund repairs to the pavilion and other enhancements to the facilities. The first proposal, in 2001, was rejected because of the ecological damage that it would cause. The second proposal, in 2006, was put to public consultation and was overwhelmingly rejected. It now seems likely that the Council will put forward a third proposal to sell land, this time as a site for The Heights Primary School.

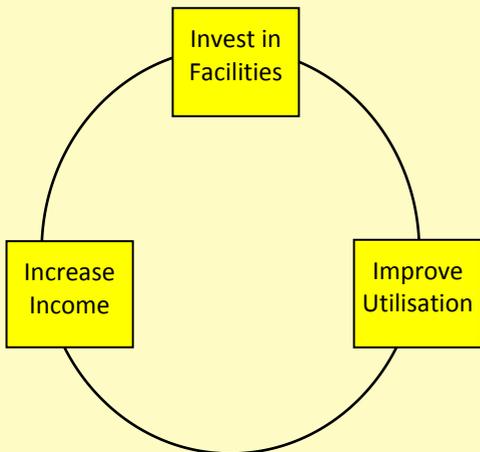
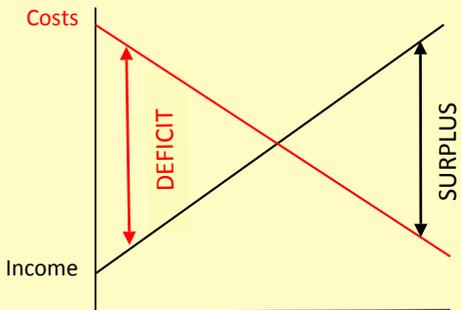
Recent volunteer initiatives have demonstrated the opportunities to restore Mapledurham Playing Fields to its former vibrancy.

- £185,000 has been raised by The Warren and District Residents Association (WADRA) to restore the pavilion. The work is being delayed by Reading Borough Council pending an offer from the Education Funding Agency to buy land for the new school.
- Caversham Treants Football Club (CTFC) has grown from 8 to 25 teams in the last seven years. Further growth, including increasing the number of teams for girls and launching a club for players with disabilities, cannot progress without the security of a long lease. The Council is not willing to grant this lease until the outcome of any proposal to build The Heights Primary School is known.
- In 2014 Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club (MLTC), with financial support from Sports England, undertook an ambitious program to improve its facilities and to triple court usage, including providing access and coaching for players who have disabilities. The final part of the plan, to provide for wheelchair players, is being delayed because an accessible toilet cannot be installed until the pavilion is restored.
- Friends of Mapledurham Playing Fields (FoMPF) work to conserve the site's natural environment and increase biodiversity. In 2002 the Mapledurham Management Committee recommended that the Playing Fields should be awarded Local Nature Reserve status, but the Council's Parks Department did not make the necessary registration.

Mapledurham Playing Fields could be radically enhanced, without the need to sell land to raise funds, if the constraints were removed and volunteering allowed to flourish.

Turnaround

Mapledurham Playing Fields currently has an annual deficit: the cost of maintenance is greater than income generated from rental of the pavilion and lease of pitches and courts. It must be made financially viable, ideally creating a surplus to support investment in facilities and community engagement.



How can this be done? Essentially the spiral of decline has to be reversed by removing constraints on volunteer initiatives and investing in the facilities, which will allow increased utilisation and, in turn, increase income to support further investment.

WADRA has already raised sufficient funds to renovate the pavilion. The plans have been drawn up. The tendering process could be completed and the pavilion made fit for use. With active marketing and management, utilisation could be extended to match similar local facilities and revenue could be dramatically increased. At the same time, renovation would reduce the need for and cost of maintenance by restoring the fabric and fixtures of the building.

Caversham Trents Football Club has funds which could be invested in enhanced facilities. CTFC has also had preliminary discussions with the Football Association, which has indicated willingness, in principle, to invest in enhancing the facilities. Any investment is only viable if CTFC is guaranteed continuing benefit over a reasonably long time frame, such as 20 years. This should be granted to allow the object of the Recreation Ground Charity (the provision of a recreation ground) to be fulfilled.

Steps

The turnaround should be planned in steps, to deliver the biggest improvements as soon as possible without disrupting access and availability more than necessary.

Step 1 The first step should be to restore the pavilion, reopen it to groups which have been displaced, attract new users and reinstate this vital source of income. Key to attracting new users will be making booking easier and marketing the facilities more effectively.



Architects drawing of upgraded pavilion

Step 2 The next step should be to build new changing rooms. This would allow the Playing Fields to host sports to higher standards. FA regulation changing rooms are required for higher level men's football and for players with disabilities, but could also be offered as a courtesy to visiting tennis and cricket teams. The original changing rooms should be refurbished to provide additional smaller studios and meeting rooms. All development initiatives should be conducted through the Recreation Ground Charity, to allow easy integration of volunteer involvement, sponsor engagement and maximum tax efficiency.

Step 3 Easy enhancements to outdoor facilities should then be undertaken. The football pitches should be improved by installing better drainage and regular top dressing, the basketball court should be restored and the Playing Fields should be registered as a Local Nature Reserve, to ensure the continued protection of the natural environment and biodiversity. All contracts for development and ongoing maintenance should be competitively tendered to secure the best value for money.

Step 4 Attention can then be turned to more major undertakings. The playground should be relocated closer to the pavilion and it should be upgraded. This will also allow reconfiguration of the Playing Fields to accommodate more football pitches and a cricket pitch. New secure storage for sports equipment, with electricity and water for maintenance, should be installed.

Step 5 Beyond this there are numerous suggestions for new sporting and recreational amenities which can be considered, including all weather pitches for football or rugby, and outdoor gym equipment, which could be installed around the periphery of the Playing Fields.

Drive

To make this all happen we need supporters and volunteers.

In the first place we need to gather sufficient supporters to demonstrate the strength of community commitment to “making Mapledurham Playing Fields fit for all without losing land” to get the proposal considered. If you would like to register your support and be kept informed of the latest developments please **email “Me Too” to info@ProtectMPF.uk**. If you do not have email please call Gordon Watt on 07957 481133.

When the proposal is accepted we will need volunteers to help. At this point it is not possible to identify all of the skills which may be required, but there are interim opportunities:

- CTFC would like to work in partnership with a committee of local people who are committed to improving our playing fields and create a lasting legacy for future grass roots football and our community.
- WADRA has been extraordinarily successful in raising funds for the pavilion restoration. It plans to continue and would welcome support in instigating or undertaking community initiatives.
- Mapledurham Playing Fields Action Group (MPFAG) is committed to protecting the Playing Fields. This will soon involve interacting with the Charity Commission and submitting a proposal including business plan. It would very much welcome advice, assistance or support from anyone who shares this commitment and would like to be involved in this initiative.

If you would like to know more or indicate your interest in any of these **please include the appropriate initials, WADRA, CTFC, MLTC, FoMPF or MPFAG, in your “Me Too” email**. If you are interested in Mapledurham Lawn Tennis Club or Friends of Mapledurham Playing Fields, please include the initials **MLTC** or **FoMPF**.

If you would like to know more about the history of Mapledurham Playing Fields and the course of the campaign to protect them **please access our website at www.ProtectMPF.uk**