

## **London Borough of Merton Sites and Policies and Policies Map – Examination**

**Public Hearing, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2014**

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For the London Borough of Merton's Site Selection Process, the Council's Call for Sites Consultation (SP4.20) yielded a number of sites which, together with additional sites that emerged, were assessed by the Council. Most of these sites were ultimately allocated in the Sites and Policies Plan suitable for various uses but a number of them were excluded.

The Inspector's questions relate to whether the sites in the Sites and Policies Plan are suitable for their allocated uses. The questions relating specifically to Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium are set out below with responses provided:

### **Site 37 – Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium**

**(a) Is this site a suitable location for an intensification of sporting activity with supporting enabling development?**

- The AFCW/Galliard proposals will achieve 'Sporting Intensification' at the site through a carefully designed and balanced land use which will bring both community and economic benefits to the Borough and its residents.
- The site is currently occupied by a Greyhound Stadium and a squash club, establishing the ability of the site to support large numbers of people on race days (both greyhound racing and stock car racing).
- Whilst the scheme for the site is still evolving, detailed discussions have been held with the Council, GLA, TFL, EA and other statutory consultees. An EIA Scoping Request has also been submitted to LB Merton. The attached architect brochure and EIA scoping document show the suitability of the site for the proposed intensification of sporting use and enabling development.
- The AFC Wimbledon/Galliard Homes proposals include a 1,000 sqm fitness club and squash courts which would serve the local community and contribute to the local economy and employment. The fitness club would provide a wide range of sports and activities and the facilities suitable for accommodating them. A statement from the current squash club is enclosed at Appendix 1, expressing the club's support for these proposals.
- The proposed scheme will also provide wider community benefits through a range of initiatives associated with the football club to include facilities and programmes such as courses which promote sport to young people and the socially disadvantaged as an alternative to anti-social behaviour. A 'Community Report' produced by AFC Wimbledon is enclosed at Appendix 2

to illustrate the community benefits and available activities associated with the proposals.

- It is AFC Wimbledon's long term ambition to relocate to a stadium with substantially greater capacity, in the London Borough of Merton. Independent consultants Colliers International identified a total of 18 potential sites in Merton which they evaluated to identify the individual merits and restrictions of each potential site, and in February 2013 the final report was issued which concluded that the best site was the Greyhound Stadium. The Colliers document is enclosed at Appendix 3.

**(b) Support has variously been expressed for providing an enhanced greyhound stadium or a football stadium on the site. On the face of it the allocation in the Plan would allow for either option. It would not be appropriate at this stage to go into the relative merits of these schemes but it has been suggested that the Plan should include a more explicit reference to seeking to retain a greyhound stadium. Is there any merit in this suggestion?**

- The provision of a football stadium for AFC Wimbledon will represent a return of the club to their historic home after more than 20 years. The football club has retained a strong presence in the Borough and has continued to contribute to the community throughout its time outside the borough, as illustrated in the Community Report mentioned above. AFC Wimbledon has a substantial local fan base; mapping information is enclosed at Appendix 5 to illustrate this. Furthermore an independent survey shows that there is substantial support for AFC Wimbledon to be based in the borough, including from individuals who are not currently fans and also businesses in the borough. Finally, the development of the AFC Wimbledon Stadium will be a key element of a broader sports-led regeneration strategy delivered through partnership with all relevant bodies.
- The development of the AFC Wimbledon Stadium provides an immediate opportunity to create a Wimbledon sports tourism destination brand to extend the profile of the area beyond the global attention received during the All England Tennis Championships.
- There is no economic, social or land use policy reason for protecting the greyhound use on the site. It is a poor use of a valuable brownfield site which could be far more beneficially utilised in the way proposed by the Council.
- Greyhound racing has decreased in popularity since the 1960s. This has been reflected in the closure of a number of tracks and decreasing track attendances. Since 2000 six National Greyhound Racing Club (NGRC) tracks have been closed down. The national average for attendance per greyhound race meet is in significant decline and greyhound tracks continue to be significantly under utilised, having also experienced a decline in revenues. Total attendance at Wimbledon fell from 214,424 in 2006 to 119,285 in 2011. The relevant information from the Greyhound Racing Authority (GRA) on the viability of Wimbledon dog track is enclosed at

Appendix 4. This shows that the retention of a dog track on this site would not be possible without public subsidy.

- Enclosed at Appendix 6 is a selection of up to date drawings and images of the emerging scheme demonstrating its deliverability. Also enclosed at Appendix 7 is a letter from NAMA, who have a controlling interest in the site, supporting the AFC Wimbledon/Galliard Homes proposals. Together with the submitted viability information this demonstrates that the muted Greyhound track proposals are not deliverable.

**(c) Is the site suitable for the sort of enabling development (residential/leisure/retail) that has been suggested?**

- Extensive work undertaken on the emerging proposals for the site demonstrate its suitability for the sporting use and enabling development proposed – please see again the attached scheme documents.
- A new residential population at this site will help meet housing need and directly support planned business and social infrastructure for existing and future communities. The site benefits from excellent access to a range of local employment opportunities to ensure that both current and future residents of the locality are able to access nearby employment opportunities leading to the creation of more sustainable live-work movement patterns.
- The principle of sports/leisure use at the site has been demonstrated by the current (and historically more active) use of the site as a greyhound stadium (also accommodating stock car racing) and squash club. The proposals represent an improved use of the site with superior facilities, and whilst the proposed football stadium would accommodate more people than the existing facilities, transport modelling and research has been undertaken to manage and respond to resulting highway impacts.
- Crowd movement and related issues are recognised as significant matters which need to be addressed. Extensive modelling has already been undertaken to confirm there are not any significant issues. A report compiled by consultants with significant relevant experience will be submitted as part of the planning application.
- In terms of flooding, based on historic data it is unlikely that the site is exposed to the frequency of flooding indicated by the Environment Agency flood modelling. We also note that the Environment Agency responded more positively to the previous representation made. The issue of flooding is considered in detail in the EIA Scoping Application. In developing the scheme discussions have been held with the EA. As a result the expert view is that the proposals will have no adverse impact on flood storage and that the development will be safe for all occupiers in the event that flooding does occur. The EIA Scoping Application and a summary of the baseline work undertaken to date is enclosed at Appendix 8.
- The overriding goal and ambition for the community is the creation of a economically sustainable, healthy and active Borough. The development of

the stadium facility represents one element of a broader strategy but provides visibility to the commitment of the club and its associated stakeholders to use sport as a catalyst for economic, social and sporting change in LB Merton. This will include meeting and conferencing facilities.

**(d) It has been suggested that the site is more suitable for industrial and warehouse development together with leisure facilities and school use. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?**

- Whilst providing more industrial and warehouse development for the Borough, it would therefore miss out on a unique opportunity to provide a redeveloped football stadium with long term socio-economic and environmental benefits to the local community and wider Borough, plus high quality associated facilities together with much needed housing provision.
- These proposals also represent a genuine “integrated approach to considering the location of housing, economic uses and community facilities and services” in accordance with the aims set out in the NPPF.
- As an investment in the sporting infrastructure of the area, AFC Wimbledon Stadium will yield considerable economic and social dividends and act as the catalyst for a heightened focus in LB Merton across areas such as sport and leisure participation, community engagement, place brand profiling, enterprise development and the creation of local employment. The club’s long term vision for the stadium is closely aligned to the economic development strategy for LB Merton and will contribute to the realisation of the area’s medium to long term strategic economic and social objectives.
- The leisure use proposed in terms of the provision of a football stadium for AFC Wimbledon will represent a return of the club to their historic home after more than 20 years. The social benefits to the local community for generations to come should not be underestimated. Such a milestone will help to facilitate LB Merton’s aspiration for regeneration and transformational change. This will assist in achieving the step change in the perception of the area required to facilitate much needed inward investment, in turn leading to better homes, local amenities and safer, more attractive and connected environment.
- In summary this site is the only viable and realistic location for the football club. If the site is zoned for other uses this opportunity and associated benefits will be lost to the Borough.
- Whilst these alternative uses have been suggested, no need for them has been demonstrated. Neither LB Merton as the LPA or the GLA as the Strategic Planning Authority have identified the site as appropriate for these uses or there being a need for them in this locale. Whilst they could be accommodated on the site they could equally be located elsewhere. Also they would not provide the same economic and social benefits as the Council’s proposed sporting intensification and enabling development.

## Appendices

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**Appendix 1:** Statement from Christophers Squash and Fitness Club

**Appendix 2:** AFC Wimbledon Community Report

**Appendix 3:** Colliers International Strategic Review of Stadium Location Options for AFC Wimbledon

**Appendix 4:** Greyhound Racing Association Report on the viability of Wimbledon dog track

**Appendix 5:** AFC Wimbledon fan base map

**Appendix 6:** Plans and images of emerging proposals

**Appendix 7:** Letter of support from site's owner, National Asset Management Agency (NAMA)

**Appendix 8:** EIA Scoping Application and baseline work