

LONDON BOROUGH OF MERTON

DRAFT SITES AND POLICIES DEVELOPMENT PLAN

REPORT FOR INSPECTOR REGARDING PUBLIC EXAMINATION

SITE 37 – WIMBLEDON GREYHOUND STADIUM

CHRISTOPHERS SQUASH AND FITNESS CLUB

Club Location and Summary

Christophers Squash Club is located at Wimbledon Stadium, Plough Lane, London SW17 0BL and we are an integral part of the Wimbledon Stadium Site. We have provided squash and other sporting and fitness facilities since 1972. We are located at the key entrance point to and directly connected to the Stadium itself with 7 squash courts, a two-storied gym, dance studio, male and female changing facilities, a sports injury clinic and bar area.

We have upwards of 70,000 person visits a year enabling people of all ages; of mixed abilities/disabilities and of all ethnicities who live in the area to exercise and engage in sports and fitness activity. At a time when the health of the nation is a key national and local policy concern – with reducing numbers of people remaining active into adulthood – we think the facilities we offer to the local community should be protected from developments that do not contribute to the either the health of the nation or to encouraging active participation in sport.

We support the Council's preferred use for the Wimbledon Stadium to be for a continuation of Planning Use Class D2 and the intensification of sporting activity. This, inter alia, includes an "...area for indoor or outdoor sports and recreations" and we believe that the continuation of Christophers Squash and Fitness Club on the Wimbledon Stadium site is an essential pre-condition for the development of the site as we are the only option that actually intensify the **active** participation of people with sport and, for this reason, we would like to ensure our services are included in any future planning use.

We recognise that the physical structure of the existing club could not remain with the development of the site – this would both restrict potential future use and the physical structure of the building has no redeeming features by which it should be protected. However, we would hope that with the council's support and in recognition of central government priorities; Merton Council policy objectives and Planning Regulations, a replacement facility will be provided that provides access to fitness and active sport for all local people and a community resource for events such as wedding receptions and funeral wakes. Christopher's Squash and Fitness Club have been providing this on a not-for-profit basis for 40 years and we hope to continue to provide these facilities in a similar way into the future – especially with the increasing number of new housing units created within walking distance of the club.

The Squash and Fitness Club

Christophers Squash and Fitness Club is the Trading name of Christophers Sports Club Limited – a not-for-profit company whose Companies House Registration Number is 3456167. Paragraph 4 of our memorandum of Association states that:

“The income and property of the Company shall be applied solely towards the promotion of its objects.....and no portion thereof shall be paid or transferred directly or indirectly by way of dividend, bonus or otherwise howsoever, by way of profit to members of the Company to the intent that any surplus arising from the activities of the Company shall in due course be applied in carrying out of its objects and in particular (but without prejudice to the scope of other objects there mentioned) the provision of sports and physical educational facilities.”

We exist to provide squash, gymnasium and community sport and exercise facilities to the local community and we operate so as to ensure all our income is invested in such activities. We aim to make profits but to re-invest **all** profits we do make into the facilities available. We make all our facilities available to all people in the area and 99% of our members live or work in Merton and Wandsworth.

The club was established in 1972 as Wimbledon Stadium Squash Club and was originally an integral part of the Stadium having been built by the stadium owner at the time and managed by his son. By 1995 the club was on the verge of closing down with only about 40 or so members left and no investment or support for its continuing existence by the owners.

At this point (1995) a lease was granted to two of those members - Peter Donoghue and Christopher Fogg – the former of whom still manages the club to this day. Until 1997 it was run exclusively as a squash club but at a time when squash had lost its mass participation. It was decided at this point the club needed something radical done to increase membership numbers and two hundred thousand pounds was invested by Mr Fogg in converting a show court and viewing gallery into a gym. Over the following year the membership increased to more than 200. In 1999, a further £15,000 was spent on modernising the changing rooms and bar area. Since this time the club has traded as Christopher's Squash and Fitness Club.

At this time, the squash club had no competitive teams although an internal league. In 2012 we have over 400 members and are fielding 7 teams in the very prestigious Surrey Cup competition. We have two teams in Division 1 and teams in Divisions 2/3/4/5/7 – by far the best of any club in the county. In addition we run two veterans teams and one vintage team and currently host a Middlesex team whose club in Spitalfield was knocked down as a consequence of developments to the area. We rank as one of the largest – if not **THE** largest squash club in the country – very few now have 7 courts. Furthermore, we are one of the strongest clubs in depth in the country.

One of the major difficulties about the club has been its dependence upon Wimbledon Stadium and its owners. Whilst a totally independent entity, we are conjoined with the Stadium since the club is physically linked to the main stadium building and our utilities are supplied by the stadium to whom we pay a rent through a long term lease. However – and to our long term detriment – there has been a six month break clause in our lease to enable the Stadium owners to give notice at any time if, for example, they wished to sell the property. This is their right and we have tried to obtain a greater certainty of tenure for many years – without success – but it

has meant that no-one – including members who could be benefactors – has been willing to invest money without some degree of security of tenure. This has also included the major sports funding bodies that have been equally as reluctant to provide grants and other financial support given the uncertainty that a 6-month break clause creates.

Current Club Use

It has been difficult to maintain membership over recent years. The long term roadworks on the Plough Lane Bridge saw membership dip considerably and it has taken a lot of effort to restore this level of membership. But the gradual impact of the recession has also taken its toll as has the difficulties with trying to maintain a club that is on a site that is in desperate need of regeneration. Our membership continues to decline as can be seen by the figures below:

31 March 2008	543 members
31 March 2009	509 members
31 March 2010	494 members
31 March 2011	488 members
31 March 2012	462 members
31 March 2013	378 members

Most of our members belong to both the squash club and the gym and many of those who are exclusively gym members play squash and pay for the courts as they use them.

As the council will recognise, most active sports organisations face massive competition from an increasingly inactive population who prefer to spend most of their time in front of the television or glued to computers. We have seen a decline in numbers and this is mirrored in the decline shown in Sport England's Active People's Survey (http://www.sportengland.org/research/active_people_survey/active_people_survey_6/key_results_for_aps6q2.aspx). Nationally, people playing squash at least once every week has declined from 300,000 to 280,000 whereas, and despite a decline in numbers, we have seen an increase in the use of our courts to an estimated 30,000 uses in the past year.

However, Christophers Squash and Fitness is far more than a squash club and is used by local people for activities such as dance classes (25 ballet, tap and street dance classes all for children), gymnasium use and martial arts. But the facilities are also used for weddings celebrations and funeral wakes as well as the provision of daily classes for elderly people – making it a community asset for many local residents. In addition we also have a fully qualified physiotherapist/nurse providing sports injury clinic and treatment for other, quasi-medical purposes.

We also actively encourage subsidised use by schools from both Merton and Wandsworth as part of their Physical education lessons. These have included Emmanuel, Elliot, Ernest Bevin, Burntwood and Graveney – all of whom use the squash courts and gym – and further opportunities could be made available given the right level of resources and facility.

Based on last year's figures, we estimate the annual use of the facilities to be as follows:

Squash	30,000 users
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Gymnasium	15,000
Dance	10,000
Fitness and other classes	10,000
Visits (Guests, social use)	3,000
Physiotherapy	2,500
Keep fit (elderly people)	1,500
Social events	1,000
School use	1,000
Martial Arts	500
Courses (e.g. Stringing)	100

In all, we estimate that the club was used nearly 75,000 times in the past year providing a significant contribution to the community and an integral part of keeping the Merton and Wandsworth population active and fit with the considerable benefits this brings not just to individuals but also the health and social care economy by reducing the demand on service provision. But the club, its ethos and its ambience also has a spirit of community. We operate on a shoestring; our facilities are desperately in need of modernisation yet there is a clearly identifiable togetherness amongst users that has to be experienced to be recognised. There is a significant amount of mutual support provided amongst members in many, many different ways and many volunteer their time not just to run teams and organise events but also to maintain the facilities and look after the club.

Redevelopment Options

We remain silent on the preferred development solution for the Wimbledon Stadium site and the purpose of our submission is to try to recognise that, on the site, we want to protect a valuable community asset that meets the needs of many local people; provides enjoyment to thousands of people using the facilities and is a major contributor to the health and fitness of many who might not otherwise participate. We save both the council and the NHS considerable money as a consequence!

We would like this recognised and protected in the inspectors decision on the future use of the site.

Mick Lowe; Honorary President, Christophers Squash and Fitness Club

Peter Donoghue; Club Manager and Director, Christophers Squash and Fitness Club