

Blues could play at sports centre

IN 1988, the Department of the Environment overruled Wycombe District Council and gave Wycombe Wanderers planning permission to build their new stadium in the Green Belt.

Since then, all aspects of environmental protection and conservation have been subjects of hugely increased concern and legislation, nationally and internationally. It is now widely acknowledged that building Adams Park in the Green Belt was a serious mistake.

In 1988, there were many who feared the club, once established, would wish to expand. Recently, the council voted seven to five to allow it to build its new stand and increased refreshment facilities. Further, there is the threat of a new road, which would fuel a demand for more parking.

A football club inevitably has a high profile, attracting extensive press coverage and providing valuable publicity for the home town, as well as giving pleasure to its supporters. Consequently, council officers are understandably reluctant to incur the displeasure of Wycombe Wanderers, and elected councillors are unwilling to offend football fans among their constituents. Nevertheless, the fans are a minority of the town's citizens, whereas conservation and sustainable development should be the concern of all of us.

This means, among other things, making the best use of precious finite resources, which include land and landscape, for the benefit of the whole community, now and for future generations. It is therefore necessary to ask if there is any possible way this conflict of interests might be more happily resolved, even at this late hour, before any further damage is inflicted on the Green Belt.

The club owns the land in the Green Belt – now recognised as wholly unsuitable for a football stadium that attracts large crowds to its home matches – while the council owns land at Wycombe Sports Centre which is wholly unsuitable for little else other than a football stadium, because it is bordered by the noisy M40 motorway and a busy dual carriageway. Football fans do not attend matches for the view, and usually make enough noise themselves to drown out traffic.

Moreover, this council land already accommodates a full-size football pitch which is surrounded by enough land for building stands, changing rooms and refreshment facilities, without interfering with any of the sports centre facilities apart from the pitch. Some minor road works at the sports centre entrance (already agreed) would facilitate public transport access to the whole sports centre area, thus contributing to sustainable transport.

In addition, there is a nearby pedestrian route under the dual carriageway, so that on Saturday afternoons, fans could walk to the ground from coaches and cars parked in the Cressex industrial estate area. Many football fans could walk from the railway station and town centre.

The club would retain its facilities at Adams Park for administration, social events and training (which all attract much smaller numbers than matches), but share some of its facilities with community sport and leisure provisions sponsored by the council.

Such overall arrangements would relieve the club and its current neighbours of present and future transport problems, the town would get some extra sport and leisure facilities, the impact on the Green Belt could be greatly reduced and as such permanently safeguarded, and public transport to the sports centre would be much improved in the interest of sustainability. Surely it should be possible to negotiate arrangements that largely accommodate all these very desirable objectives!

Of course, there would be some temporary inconvenience, but sustainable development is about long-term environmental protection, with benefit to the whole community. No doubt extra costs would be entailed, but given the opportunity and encouragement, voluntary contributions equivalent to 2p per week extra on Group D council tax could raise a sum of £60,000 in a year. Many people who are not football supporters would be glad to contribute even more, in the interests of protecting the Green Belt and promoting sustainable sport.

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