

Protect our Pitches, They Say – But Why?

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"There's no use trying," said Alice. "One can't believe impossible things."

"I have to say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "Why sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Remember those “Keep off the Grass” signs that used to grace our parks? Well, they’re back, but this time as the rallying cry for those who want to make sure that our increasingly obese young people have as few opportunities to play football as possible, other than at the weekend and then only on grotty pitches, often with no or appalling changing accommodation. To be fair, that’s not quite how they present their argument, but it’s what will happen if their demands to increase the protection of playing fields from development are heeded.

Across much of the UK, there’s a growing shortage of housing. The current rate of house building is well below the level needed to match the rate of household formation in many areas. The Government has patted itself on the back for achieving a significant proportion of new housing on brownfield rather than greenfield sites but, as various commentators have pointed out, the actual number of new houses on both is hopelessly inadequate. And there’s growing evidence that the planning obligations system simply can’t deliver the number of affordable houses needed.

So what’s the solution? Well, if some people have their way it’ll be a weasel-worded policy of “some controlled incursion into the Green Belt”. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, England's planning supremo, is alleged to have made the somewhat ambiguous statement that “the Green Belt is one of Labour's finest achievements – and we're going to build on it”. It’s all part of his desire to promote an urban renaissance. Significantly to increase the number of new houses built each year, especially in south-east England. For towns and cities to be more densely developed. To protect the countryside. To persuade us all to use our cars less and public transport more. And he wants developers to provide affordable housing for essential key workers. In London, Ken Livingstone

wants to do much the same and London to be a 'Sustainable World City'. Meantime, in many areas the much-hyped urban renaissance is little more than yet more spin. And the ecological justification behind this framework is at best simplistic.

The Government is depending on "joined up thinking" to deliver its urban renaissance, but there are far too few signs of it happening. And the more that particular interests, such as those who defend football pitches, stick their head in the sand (or should that be the mud?) and insist that the status quo must continue, the harder it will be. "Renaissance" means looking at problems in new ways and doing things differently, not just building things. Why think another fifty years of the policies that resulted in a need for an urban renaissance will also deliver it?

Wouldn't it be better to use the Green Belt for playing fields and existing football pitches for houses? After all, most football pitches are used by twenty odd people once or twice a week, while houses are in use every single day. And past attempts at building in the Green Belt, such as the large council estates on the periphery of many towns and cities, weren't exactly one of the planning system's greatest achievements, were they? Why condemn people who can't currently afford homes, and often personal transport, to live further and further from work and city centre amenities, forcing them either to drive into town, clogging up the city even more, or spend longer and longer every day on expensive public transport? It's hardly social inclusion.

So here's some real joined up urban thinking, with the potential to deliver benefits for everyone. And what's more, it doesn't depend on Mr G Brown of 11 Downing Street, London SW1 ditching prudence and taking on the unlikely mantle of a fairy godmother.

Question. Do we want to keep the status quo and retain most football facilities in their present state? Certainly not: 41% of football pitches in England need drainage improvements; 38% have no changing and 94% have no female changing. Only 6% have floodlights. (1)

Question. How much will it cost to bring existing football facilities up to a decent standard? Around £2,000,000,000 - two billion pounds. That's the amount the Football Association has estimated will be needed - for England. Meanwhile, pitches and changing accommodation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland need investment every bit as much. And the solution, according to the status quo thinkers, such as London's Greens, the National Playing Fields Association and others? Easy: more public or Lottery funding. But Lottery income is going down steadily, and if the UK bid for the 2012 Olympics is successful there'll be an estimated 10% less for each Lottery distributor to spend on local projects.

Question. Edinburgh has around 500 grass pitches, with 300 of them owned by the Council. Of those 300 at least 200 need major upgrading. After over ten years of

negotiations, a developer recently got planning permission, at a call-in inquiry, to build flats on a small, sloping part of one of the Council's playing fields – in the teeth of determined opposition from the “keep off the grass” lobby, determined to protect the site for future generations of players. How many of the current generation of players, from schools and cricket, football and rugby clubs using the site objected to the proposed development? None. Zip. Zilch. Zero. Why? Because they want decent facilities, not a wind and rain-swept patch of mud with rat-infested changing accommodation dating back to World War 1. Meantime the seven pitches on the site have deteriorated to such an extent that goalies sometimes spend more time paddling than playing in goal. As a result the City will get £6M worth of pitch and pavilion improvements. At this rate of progress the Council will be able to bring its other pitches up to an acceptable condition in only about another 280 years. Great.

Question. How many football clubs are actually doing much to develop participation or skill levels in football? Very few. Most are little more than a group of pals who get together to play matches and train occasionally. The vast majority run only one team and don't want new members or the hassle of forging the links with schools which the Sports Councils have been promoting for years.

Question. The Keep off the Grass gang is correct when they say that many areas have lost a few grass pitches over the past decade. So what? Each of them was playable for only 2–3 games a week. And against the loss, most areas have gained floodlit artificial turf pitches which can, at least in theory, be used 24 hours a day. In terms of average use per week, one artificial turf pitch is equivalent to ten or more grass pitches (2). So, in spite of those pitches which have been “lost for ever”, many areas can now accommodate more participation than ever before.

Question. What's been happening to participation in football in recent years? Simple: there's been a significant shift away from 11-a-side games on grass, mud and cinders to five-a-side play either indoors or on artificial surfaces. And as the average age of the UK's population increases, participation in pitch sports will fall further. Sport England has forecast that if current trends continue, the number of team sports players in England will decline by around 5% from 1996 to 2026. (3)

Question. Are grass pitches cost effective? No. They're very expensive to maintain properly (not that any local authorities do – they simply can't afford it). 1990 research for the Scottish Sports Council found that the whole life costs of grass football pitches – excluding land and providing and operating changing facilities, but including regular upgrading to drainage – cost around £150 per football match, or about £7 per player. By comparison, using exactly the same calculation approach, and even allowing for the replacement of the carpet every ten years, artificial turf pitches cost only about £45 per match (4). All local authorities charge significantly more for artificial than grass pitches,

so it doesn't take an accountant to work out which approach is more sustainable financially.

Question. Are artificial pitches suitable for football? They were tried a few years ago and no-one liked them. That's true; but now there are now "third generation" surfaces which are designed especially for football. Half of the matches in Euro 2008 and World Cup matches in 2010 will be played on them (5). If they're good enough for the most expensive professional players in the world, playing the world's top competitions, they're good enough for local players.

Question. What do urban areas depend on? Key workers. Without affordable housing for them, more and more of the people who actually make them work – for example, the people who drive the first bus in the morning and the last bus at night, the nurses, the teachers, the cleaners – will be forced to live elsewhere. Is that what we want?

Question. Which needs to be closer to city centres – houses or pitches? One hectare of land used for housing will generate significantly more traffic and car journeys in a week than one hectare of land used for a grass pitch. And even if pitches **were** accessible by public transport, does anyone really think footballers would rather use it than travel by car in groups? Wise up.

Question. Across the UK, how many local authority grass pitches provide such superb playing conditions, week in, week out – not to mention warm, comfortable, well equipped changing pavilions, free from vandalism – that players enthuse about them? Not a lot! And isn't professional football morally bankrupt and financially insolvent? How can clubs buy and sell their top players like expensive cattle, pay them millions of pounds a year, turn a largely blind eye to tabloid stories – or worse – relating to their off-field behaviour and spend many more millions on rebuilding Wembley, when so-called "grass roots" football suffers such abysmal facilities? Why on earth do we persist in our naïve belief that taking part in pitch sports on grotty pitches, often with no or near derelict changing, will somehow convince young people that life long participation in sports like football is enjoyable and therefore "a good thing"?

Question. What other roles do pitches perform in urban areas? The Keep off the Grass lobby try to support their protectionist argument by claiming that playing fields are multi-functional. The London Greens, for example, talk of the "natural heritage" of playing fields and Noel Lynch, a Member of the London Assembly, states that "playing fields are vital to the well being of Londoners. They provide us with not just a place for sports, but also somewhere for walking or just to sit out in an open green space." (6) Dog walking, certainly – but how many sports people welcome the fouling they tend to leave behind? And how much are pitches actually used for sitting? How many have seats? There seems to be deliberate confusion of large flat, featureless areas of short grass with more diverse green spaces that really are used for a multitude of purposes.

In terms of amenity and local character, pitches and playing fields do provide some open-ness, but are they really valued more than that? Surely this important land resource could be used better to support more sustainable urban areas. Its biodiversity value is extremely limited. Apart from occasionally catering for grazing Canada geese, gathering areas for roosting crows, or stop-over autumnal migration flocks of redwing and fieldfare they utterly joyless. How many butterflies flutter over them? How many lizards wiggle through the grass? How many plant species are present? Very few. Pitches are simply deadened monoculture prairies, designed for quick and cheap maintenance by machines; large expanses of over-nitrated perennial rye-grass, offering no food and no shelter, other than for the soil organisms below. And even these will probably have been blasted by the technologies of the ground staff.

So let's take our courage in all ten fingers and consign the unplanned, money-grabbing disposal of playing fields to the dustbin of history and, instead, develop an approach designed to re-invent our urban areas and solve a number of urban problems in a joined-up way:

Firstly, the reason house prices are rocketing is because there aren't enough of them. In large part, this is because there isn't enough land on which to build the houses to accommodate everyone who wants to live in them. The result is that many existing houses earn more than the people who live in them. That's daft. So sell those pitches which will generate the most cash to developers – not all at once, but over a period of years so as to maximise the value. Ban the use of standard house types and insist that the developers include high quality greenspaces, such as neighbourhood parks, to ensure householders have a decent home in attractive surroundings. Ensure these parks and greenspaces support biodiversity are visually at the heart of these new housing environments and physically accessible to everyone in them – and not just the difficult to develop bits of land on top of major utility services. Incorporate Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems, green roofs and other specific features. And, crucially, ensure there are adequate arrangements for the proper management and maintenance of them, ideally in a way which involves the new residents and gives them a real say over how resources are used.

Second, hand over those pitches closest to good public transport routes to registered social landlords such as housing associations for affordable housing. The people who will live in these new houses are those most likely to depend on public transport and can then use existing shops, schools and other facilities. Insist that these new developments also include attractive neighbourhood parks and green spaces which serve not only the new houses but existing ones nearby as well. Local authorities could easily make a deliberate and completely defensible decision not to seek full market value for their pitches if the result is key worker, affordable and/or social housing.

Third, use some of the cash generated from selling pitches to developers to build a floodlit artificial turf pitch at every school that doesn't already have one, including primaries. Include decent changing accommodation and social accommodation for local clubs, entirely separate from the school buildings – but share parking as the time of school and community use of the new pitches will be complementary. Primary pitches will give a good, all-weather 5-a-side, kickabout or training facility for adults and practice and match facility for mini-soccer teams within walking or cycling distance of every home. Secondary schools – most of which should have two artificial pitches – can provide facilities for training, coaching and matches for youth and adult teams. The number of pitches in an area matters only if every match has to start at the same time on the same day. With floodlit artificial pitches they don't, as hockey has shown. All it needs is football leagues to be more flexible and stop assuming that they have a right to whatever they say they need, but pay only a fraction of the cost of providing it. Let's encourage children – and adults – to enjoy sport by giving them high quality, all-weather facilities, not put them off it by forcing them to use near-unplayable ones! The clubs based on these secondary school sites will be able to run a number of male and female teams in various age groups and offer coaching and sports development opportunities – and provide the direct school-club links which the Sports Councils keep promoting.

Fourth, use some of the cash to build new rugby and cricket pitches on the periphery – only rugby and cricket need grass pitches. Hockey doesn't, while FIFA has agreed that new "long pile" artificial turf pitches can be used for some matches in the 2006 World Cup, so why shouldn't British footballers play on them now? Or would they rather continue to wallow in mud, use tactics based on booting the ball up the park and hoping for a lucky bounce, and freeze in isolated changing pavilions?

Fifth, invest some of the cash to generate income to pay for the maintenance of the new neighbourhood parks and improving existing ones. Many are in a worse condition now than for many years.

Granted, all of this will need some bold thinking and bold action. It'll also be necessary to ignore the inevitable cries that all playing fields are sacred and must be protected for future generations – irrespective of their condition and ignoring the fact that they are, almost certainly, putting young people off sport. The protectionist lobby has far too narrow a perspective and it isn't clear exactly what its real motives are, other perhaps than nimbyism and a fear of change. In some cases, perhaps we should be looking at some playing fields as being the ideal canvasses to undertake exciting wetland creation projects that will be usable by more people and wildlife than they are at present. Moorhens rather than footballs?

Finally, which offers more hope for the future? On the one hand, an unthinking "nothing should change" lobby offering increasingly unaffordable standard developers' housing,

continued reliance on the car, inevitable expansion into the Green Belt, urban sprawl and increasingly unplayable pitches used for a few hours each week. On the other, joined-up but radical action to re-invent and enhance our urban areas, promote the liveability agenda, give more people a decent home in an attractive and sustainable environment and significantly better opportunities for footballers to enjoy their sport in larger, more viable clubs on consistently high quality pitches close to home?

It's time to blow the final whistle for grass football pitches!

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