

Financing a New Stadium

The Club's perilous financial situation has and will continue to hinder the Club's ability to finance a new stadium. Deloitte & Touche estimates that to fund fully a 20,000 seater stadium, ignoring the cost of buying the site and allowing for no net investment in the playing squad, the Club would require £50 million over the development and construction period.

Few football clubs have been able to raise this amount of money. Clubs that have had to raise money have had to rely on wealthy benefactors or commercial third party sources. Given the Club's poor financial position, it is not possible for the Club to raise the money needed from commercial third parties.

All English football stadia built during the last decade have received some kind of assistance from local authorities or quasi-Government agencies. This support has typically taken the form of subsidised land acquisition costs, financial support for cleaning and preparing a site, and assistance with planning applications. Most have also benefited from enabling development on and around the stadium site. No proposal for any of this kind of support has been made available to the Club within Merton or in any of the surrounding Boroughs.

The Search For A Home

For many years the Club has searched exhaustively for a site in or around Merton on which to build a new stadium.

The Club has:

- Looked closely together with Merton Council at 14 different sites within Merton over a period of 5 years.
- Looked at further suggested sites within Greater London.
- Commissioned a feasibility study of Plough Lane from one of the country's top planning consultants, FPD Savills.
- Jointly commissioned a feasibility study of the Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium.
- Written to 34 local authorities throughout Greater London and the South East.

In 1998, Merton Council conducted its own assessment of sites within the Borough to assess their suitability for the location of a new stadium. Only one - Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium - was identified as having any potential. In October last year, the Council produced a further report equating the task of finding a home for the Club in the Borough as "achieving the impossible in a densely built up urban area".

'Any proposal for a stadium will, from a planning perspective, have very considerable difficulties in light of the prevailing planning regime in Merton. I consider the likelihood of obtaining planning permission for a stadium development to be very low.' FPD Savills

Plough Lane

It has been suggested that the Club's former ground, Plough Lane, is a viable option for the Club's new stadium. However, FPD Savills reached the conclusion that there are major, insurmountable obstacles that would prevent the Club's return to Plough Lane.

'For Plough Lane to become a sustainable location it would be necessary to create starting almost from nothing a highly developed and effective public transport system.' Planning Inspector, Safeway's planning inquiry

Planning Problems

FPD Savills' study highlights that developing a new stadium at Plough Lane would immediately face difficulties in terms of local, regional and national planning policy.

The 1999 and 2000 reviews of Merton's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) provide no policy for the development of a football stadium within the Borough. In the new plan the Plough Lane site has been redesignated 'Housing and B1 (office) and Community and Open Space'. Government Planning Policy Guidance on sport and recreation (PPG17) would not support the Club's return to Plough Lane. The guidance says 'a site for development as large as a major football stadium should normally be identified in a local plan'.

Plough Lane, redesignated as a site for housing development, is one of the few large sites available for housing development in the Borough. Consequently its redevelopment for residential purposes would make a major contribution to the Council achieving current and future housing targets. Its redevelopment as a football stadium development would be a significant failure on behalf of the Council to achieve these targets.

Many local residents near to Plough Lane (who vociferously and successfully opposed Safeway's planning application for the site) are strongly opposed to a new stadium being built and support the development of new housing on the site.

A portion of the Plough Lane site is designated by Merton Council as a travellers' site. Any proposal for the redevelopment of the whole site would require the relocation of the travellers' site elsewhere in the Borough. This would undoubtedly prove extremely difficult and take a long time to achieve.

'I fully understand and support your decision to move Wimbledon Football Club to Milton Keynes. It is clear that since going to Selhurst Park you have been unable to build a sustainable fan base in what is effectively another club's conurbation.' Football League Club Chairman

Transport

FPD Savills' assessment of Plough Lane stated that the area's poor transport infrastructure would be prohibitive in developing a new stadium at Plough Lane:

Government planning guidance for sport and recreation (PPG17) advises that when locating football league stadia 'account will be taken of all normal planning considerations such as traffic, parking, access to public transport and possible conflicts with neighbouring uses'. And that 'all (i.e. large sports developments like stadia) sites will ... need to be well located for access for public transport'.

To create a highly effective public transport system from 'almost nothing' would be prohibitively expensive.

Finance

Estimates by FPD Savills, Deloitte & Touche and HOK Sport all suggest that the costs of developing a stadium at Plough Lane would be well beyond the means of the Club.

The site has planning permission for residential development and is currently owned by Safeway. It is valued in excess of £12 million.

The limited size of the site would make any significant enabling development impossible and force the Club to fund the full cost of the redevelopment itself.

The estimated total cost of acquiring the land, constructing a stadium and the Section 106 (transport infrastructure) requirements would be in excess of £70 million. Well beyond the means of the Club.

In light of the location, lack of accessibility by public transport and the impact of a stadium on trip generation, highway safety and movement I have considerable doubt as to whether the Planning Committee would endorse a proposal by Wimbledon at Plough Lane and even more doubt as to whether the Secretary of State would countenance such a favourable resolution if referred to him.' FPD Savills

Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium

In 1997 a feasibility study of Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium was commissioned by the London Borough of Merton and the Greyhound Racing Association. The study highlighted a number of major problems with the Greyhound Stadium as a proposed site for the Club's new home.

- Access to the site by public transport is relatively poor.
- The compact site restricts the ability to design any stadium as a quality venue.
- The majority of spectators attending the ground for events other than greyhound racing are located outside the ideal viewing contour.
- Current restrictions are dictating a stadium layout that is irregular with constant changes in terrace depth, which will result in poor viewing characteristics, and variation in rooflines leading to costly engineering solutions.
- The successful re-development of the site will require an element of high value 'enabling development'.
- The site would need greater car parking provision than the Council would support.

The leading sports stadia architects, HOK Sport were also commissioned by the Club to assess the design and construction implications for re-developing the Greyhound Stadium into a 25,000 multi-sport stadium. HOK concluded that:

The redevelopment of the Greyhound Stadium to solely a football stadium would cost between £31 million and £38 million excluding land acquisition costs.

A combined football and greyhound stadium would cost between £37.5 million and £44 million to develop, again excluding land acquisition costs.

There is unlikely to be any space for enabling development. Most crucially, the Greyhound Stadium is currently a thriving business and the owners have no desire to close it down to facilitate the construction of a stadium for the Club.

Other Sites

The Club has also looked at a number of other sites within Merton and south west London. None proved to be viable. In addition, the Club suggested that Prince George's Playing Fields might be a suitable site.

The Club originally intended to use the site for the development of the Club's football academy. In light of Merton Council granting the All England tennis Club permission to build a new Number One court on Metropolitan Open Land the Club suggested to Merton Council that the site could be a potential location for the Club's new stadium. The Council rejected the proposal because the land is designated Metropolitan Open Land and because of its close proximity to residential areas.

Beyond Merton

FPD Savills also looked for sites South of the River Thames both within a 25-mile radius of Plough Lane and in corridor as far south as Horsham and Mid-Sussex districts. None of the authorities approached had identified within their development plans a proposed site for a football stadium, or expressed a wish for the establishment of the Club within their area. The only authority which suggested a possibility of a site was one being driven by commercial developers which numerous Clubs had already investigated and rejected since the project was based primarily on developers extracting land value NOT linked to the benefits of football.

'Whilst it is acknowledged that football is an important part of community and economic life and the well being of those involved in it, for the vast majority of local authorities a decision to locate an 'outside' club within its boundaries together with a 20,000 seater stadium would be seen as a potential negative with a consequence of lost votes for the political party supporting the proposal. Every proposed development of a football stadium of which I am aware has raised considerable local hostility and controversy. Football stadia are not popular neighbours.' FPD Savills

Please note that this information has been supplied by Wimbledon Football Club