

Camden New Journal

PROPERTY: Community-led buyout plan rolled out for Mansfield Bowling Club



The former Mansfield Bowling Clubhouse

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by **DAN CARRIER**

A COMMUNITY-owned company is being established to attempt to buy a defunct bowling club in Dartmouth Park – and stop plans to build luxury housing. The site, owned by the now closed Mansfield Bowling Club, sits behind homes in Croftdown Road.

A planning application by the club to build eight new houses on private open land – which enjoys the same planning protection as the Green Belt – was dismissed earlier this year by the Town Hall.

Last week, developer Generator, acting on behalf of the club, hosted an exhibition to discuss possible plans for the site, while the club appeals against the council's decision is ongoing. In the same week, the club informed Camden Council they intended to sell the site.

Under the Localism Act, if sites designated by neighbourhood forums as being of inherent value for the area are put up for sale, they have a six-month period to raise the market value of the land before it is sold on the open market.

Plans to buy the land by a community company made up of local civic groups would be a historic first in Camden – and insiders behind the bid say it could offer a new community-led centre and outdoor sports area, including allotments and orchards.

It would also look to guarantee the future of the Kenlyn Tennis Club.

However, it would rely on a deal being struck between the new company and club directors and previously antagonistic discussions over the future of the club being consigned to the past.

Patrick Lefevre, chairman of Dartmouth Park Conservation Area Advisory Committee – involved in the community-led bid to buy the land – has said they would fight against any “substantial speculative luxury housing development anywhere on this site, end of story”.

He said the land must be dedicated to open space and sport, saying: “It has been for well over a 100 years. Once this new application is defeated, the best way to achieve this is to bring the site into community ownership.”

He added the Local Development Framework – that governs what can and cannot be built – states it must be used for leisure activities and said they were confident the council would reject any application.

He said: “A very modest truly ‘enabling’ development within the footprint of the clubhouse is acceptable if this is necessary to replace the current monstrosity of the clubhouse and secure continued sport leisure use.”

He concluded by adding he was “pretty much certain” people living in the area would try to buy the site.

Mr Lefevre also lent the committee's weight to the idea that any work at the club should be part of a wider scheme to improve the Highgate Newtown Community Centre.

He said: “We hope Camden will now shelve its narrow Community Investment Programme-led proposals for the Highgate Newtown Community Centre site and put its weight behind HNCC becoming a full partner in an exciting and groundbreaking wider scheme.”

The Mansfield Neighbours Committee, who have campaigned to stop the luxury housing development plan by the bowling club, criticised the club for saying the site was up for sale while holding a public exhibition about its future.

Chairman Paul Barker told the *New Journal*: “The Mansfield Neighbours group was very surprised that they [the Bowling Club] issued a notice of intention to sell the MBC site a few days ahead of last week's supposed ‘public consultation workshop’.

This undermined any attempt at openness. It evoked the deviousness which tainted the MBC's previous development plans, which were firmly rejected in July. That said, the ‘workshop’ itself, organised by MBC's developer, Generator, did show some welcome signs of listening to people's views.

“All the housing alternatives put forward by Generator focused on developing the existing MBC clubhouse, now vacant, mostly within its existing footprint, and preserving most of the designated Open Space.

“Many questions need to be thought through – including where would the profits go and what proportion of leisure use would a new development include? Any site ‘creep’ has to be resisted, including height and any spread beyond the existing footprint.”

He added the committee would be part of any discussion of a community bid for the land.

But for the deal to go ahead, not only will £100,000s need to be raised but bridges built with the club's board.

Mansfield Bowling Club director Adrian Pruss told the *New Journal* he objected to claims that the club had been mismanaged.

He said: “We have done all we can. We have faced declining membership, but we have managed to cut our losses significantly.”

And sources said no directors of the club, which was established in 1891, would personally make a financial gain from any sale.

With the figure likely to be substantially lower if no planning permission for housing is granted, the source added that after repaying tax bills from the sale waived as it was an amateur sports club, receipts would be shared out among members or reinvested in bowling.

Reacting to a community buyout bid, club president Andy Docker said: “If someone came to us with a viable proposal that would guarantee the future of the bowling club, we would look carefully at it.”

Highgate ward councillors have also backed the community buyout plan.

Labour councillor Sally Gimson said: “Any housing development must include affordable homes on site and not elsewhere – the last thing NW5 needs is a posh, expensive, gated community.

“Furthermore, no open land at all should be built on and access to the Kenlyn Tennis club should be kept. There is also a real need for Brookfield school to have better access to outdoor sports space. This could be the answer.”

Highgate Green councillor Maya De Sousa also said the club should now be used as a community centre.

She said: “It's vital that the site of the Bowling Club retains its leisure use.

“There is a strong demand for leisure services in the area, but the right services. Bowling is no longer what's needed.

“And where better than this for a pottery studio, where better for gymnastics and tennis.

The decision of the Council to develop the Highgate Newtown site primarily for housing adds to this need. I'll be pressing the directors of the Bowling Club and the Bowling Club of GB – the only ones who should gain from a sale – to act in an honourable manner and sell the site for community use at an affordable price reflecting its planning designation.

“I'm also asking the council to help fund the purchase of what is registered as and should become a community asset.”

A spokesman for developers Generator clarified some issues over their interest and ownership. They said both the club and the company were “working together” to find a way of developing the site.

They added: “MBC own the site but have a contract with Generator to obtain planning permission to secure the future of the site. For legal reasons we cannot disclose the specific contract details between MBC and Generator.”

They added the club could not open for the coming indoor season due to finances, and in light of their first application being turned down, they were now exploring all options for the land.