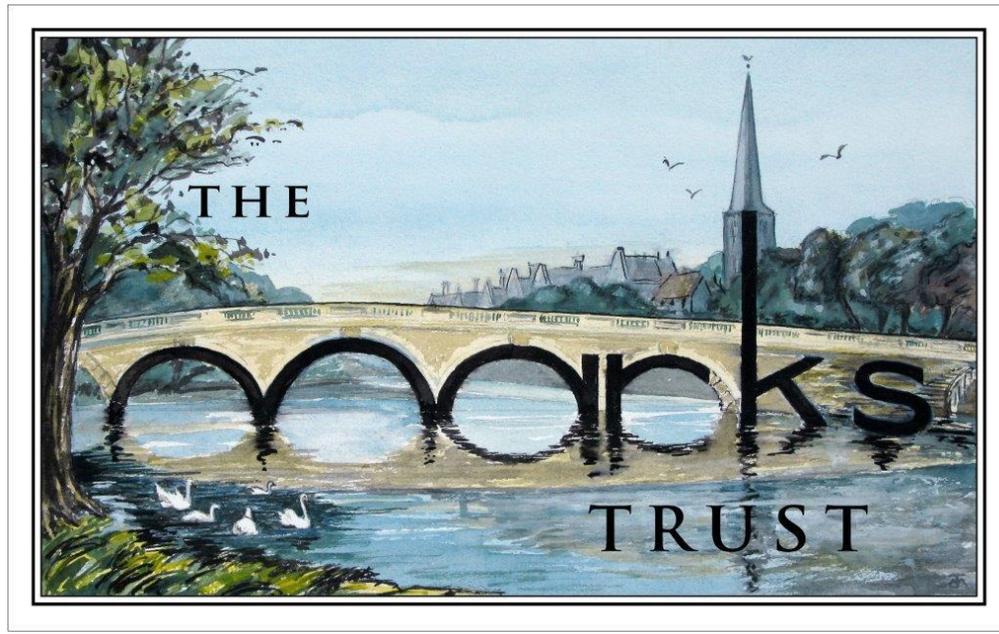


A Bedford Community Consultation to gauge opinion
on the
importance of rugby to Bedford
and the way forward
Commissioned on behalf of Bedford Blues Ltd

Prepared by



The Marks Trust

A Bedford Charity, bringing facilities to enhance the community of Bedford

10th September 2014



Background and Purpose

This document has been prepared by the Marks Trust, a local Bedford Charity, following a limited consultation exercise which has involved a number of meetings with some directly interested parties. However, due to time constraints we have not had time to consult all the valuable supporting business or key contacts associated with rugby in Bedford.

The content of this document is a summary of the opinions voiced during these meetings and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Marks Trust or its Trustees or any particular club.

This next stage therefore is to extend this consultation to a wider audience to establish whether these opinions are more widely supported or indeed to canvas additional ideas or contrary opinion.

It is hoped that the results of this exercise will help create a strategic vision for rugby in Bedford that will gain support of Local Government, Businesses, players and spectators alike.

What is unanimous opinion is that Rugby is more than just a competitive sport. The “special” culture, atmosphere, principles and passion that are enshrined in the game of rugby are aligned with the things that we would want to teach our own children in life. Effort, respect, trust, teamwork, honesty and fair play.

I urge you to log onto the consultation website so that your views can be registered.



Jo Marks

Chairman of the Trustees

The Marks Trust



Rugby in Bedford

Bedford is one of the largest towns in the UK without a recognised football league club; instead Bedford is known as being one of a few towns in the UK where rugby is better recognised and supported.

Bedford has been linked with rugby for many, many years, formally established with the creation of “Bedford Blues” in 1886, as a consequence of the amalgamation of Bedford Rovers (1876) and Bedford Swifts (1882). Along with the ground at Goldington Road which has seen great achievements by the “Bedford Blues” over the years, rugby is also a primary recognised sport in local Schools, where the game is the focus of many children’s lives. “Bedford Blues” attracts players from local schools and further afield, including International and world class players.

The history of rugby in Bedford has had its “ups & downs”, however when the town was at risk of losing the Rugby club in 1999, a group of Bedford businesses stepped in to fund and support the club. As a result the “Blues” have gone from strength to strength to become a well-respected team, more recently given Bedford the accolade of reaching the finals of the RFU Championship in 2013. The excitement generated by the “Blues” has led to over 600 children registering at “Bedford Junior Blues” playing rugby on a Sunday with aspirations of one day representing their town and becoming a “Bedford Blue”.

Despite the enormous role that rugby plays within the local community, there has been a history of division between the various clubs which include Bedford Blues, Bedford Athletic Rugby Club, Swifts and Queens. **It is clear that they all require substantial funding and the consensus of opinion during this exercise is that their current facilities are inadequate for the overwhelming demand to play rugby within Bedford, which currently limits Bedford’s future ability to produce success on the field.**

In May 2014 the current chairman, who along with other Bedford businesses have generously supported and helped fund the “Bedford Blues”, announced his forthcoming retirement. He advised that the club required around £250,000 per annum of donations and sponsorship to survive in its current format.

He gave notice that if the club did not come forward with a proposal to resolve this, the Rugby Club would not survive in its present form. He has kindly agreed to continue to support and fund the club up until May 2016, after which, Bedford Blues will be their own going forward.

When looking at other successful rugby clubs it is clear that they rely on over 50% of their income to be generated from non-rugby activities, which include hiring out facilities and other complimentary activities on their sites.

On this basis, the Goldington Road site buildings and marquee are clearly under-utilised and the cost of running the club could probably become self funding if the business could likewise generate 50% of income



from the 6 acre site. However, in order to achieve this, the facilities would require modernising and expanding.

There is also a demand from women to be included, with the RFU just announcing that they plan to introduce rugby to 100,000 women and girls, after our fantastic World Cup victory last month, with the aim of 25,000 women and girls taking part in contact rugby by 2017. Women and girls games have seen enormous growth over the past 12 months with playing numbers increasing from 15,000 to 18,000 – double the growth seen in any other year. This means England already has the largest female rugby population in the world.

Rugby also plays a big part in many children and families lives, both playing and supporting the game which provides significant comradeship within the town, which is something the Bedford clubs are very proud of.

The variables both within the rugby Club, and influences outside of its control has led to stagnation and limited strategic vision going forward, with the current financial goal being just to survive. There are many other local teams playing successful rugby within Bedford at different locations that have indicated that they have insufficient pitches and facilities to keep up with the demand.

It therefore seems appropriate to take this opportunity to look at the bigger picture, and combine the visions of the individual clubs in order for rugby to prosper over the next 10 years and beyond.

Goldington Road Site

The Goldington Road site only hosts the “Bedford Blues”. The current facilities hinder Bedford’s ability to ever play rugby in the Premier League, as the required standards are not met. Furthermore, the pitch currently slopes corner to corner by 3.5m. It is felt that the facilities are in need of modernisation as they look old and tired compared to the expectations of today’s spectators.

There is only one match pitch available with insufficient spectator capacity, with generally poor viewing due to lack of stands. This makes it difficult for children to be able to gain a good view and there is limited covered stands in the event of bad weather.

It was felt that the club house and facilities are in need of modernisation, and also that the experience could be enhanced for women and children.

Having carried out an analysis of 10 years audited accounts for Bedford Blues Ltd, overseen by a team of independent accountants and financial experts, it is clear that due to the cost of the players and maintaining the Goldington Road site, the Club cannot survive on the income from the rugby matches alone. Even in 2013 when the “Blues” reached its best finish in the Championship final, with record numbers of spectators and games played, the club still made a loss of £84,000. The recent 2014 year end results for “Bedford Blues” are expected to report a loss in excess of £350,000.



It is understood that there may only be two clubs that are profitable in the professional game, both of which rely on over 50% of their income to come from non-rugby related activity. Therefore it appears crucial that other revenue opportunities are explored for the Goldington Road “Blues” club to survive.

Discussion with other Bedford clubs suggest that there is a proven immediate need for an all-weather pitch with a covered stand and fitness centre in one location which all clubs could use. It could be fully utilised 7 days a week and could provide additional income for the rugby club, but even if the funds were available, it might not be feasible with the current limitations at Goldington Road.

For the wider immediate demands of most of the smaller rugby clubs in Bedford, **there is an urgent need to find viable training and match facilities, with separate facilities for women**, in order to meet the levels that Bedford could achieve in future. **With over 600 young players registered to play rugby in Bedford Borough, there is undoubtedly a demand for new training facilities to allow them the opportunity to achieve their aspirations which needs to be addressed now.**

Clubs and the Wider Community

The majority of the Clubs in the Bedford Borough have been consulted. All these Clubs so far have indicated that they agree that by co-operating together, the valuable service they provide to children and families will have a greater chance of continuing and improving in the future.

A potential strategic vision has been discussed, whereby the different clubs unite to move forward together, with each club being part of a larger umbrella of excellence, whilst maintaining their own identity. This vision has been widely accepted as a sensible strategy to ensure that Bedford rugby continues to grow and improve and would increase the town’s reputation. Further investment in the town’s main sport will generate more interest in Bedford itself and public relations can be managed effectively to enhance the town’s image.

The wider community of schools, university, parents, players, businesses and local people generally feel proud of rugby within the town and it is felt will back any improvements that can be made.

This is a marvellous opportunity to show off the town and build on the legacy of rugby for the future. There should be a vision to provide a home-grown team with players who can move on to represent their Country. This has already been achieved by several players obtaining their rugby training in Bedford.

It is felt important that we ensure our current generation of players and the future generations have the facilities and expertise available to allow them to reach international level.



Structure

A clear structure is required throughout rugby training in Bedford, from grass roots up to the elite standard required by Bedford Blues. Feeder schools and clubs exist, but it is widely considered that the current structure of combined, focused rugby and training facilities do not fulfil the current needs and certainly will not be suitable for future generations.

Whilst each club is proud of its own history and may well want to maintain its independence, branding and existing sites, **the vision of an overall umbrella providing a “Bedford Rugby Centre of Excellence” is generally welcomed and supported to enhance our Bedford Community and to maximise the potential of rugby in Bedford.**

The structure will obviously require further discussion with all clubs, to ensure that it is fully supported, whilst addressing individual club requirements.

Training Facilities

Additional training facilities are needed to include a suitable club house to accommodate the requirements of most of the Bedford Clubs including Bedford Blues.

Currently there appears too much division between the Clubs, which does not help to bring forward the best players in order to earmark them for future success. Unity is required within Bedford Clubs to ensure that we fully support the talented individuals, whilst providing superb coaching and fitness opportunities for every member of the club from tag-rugby upwards. Sharing excellent facilities, such as 4G pitches and floodlights, means everyone could benefit.

Women also need coaches and facilities to play and Bedford could be ahead of the game.

Commercial Opportunities

Commercial interests need to be considered for the long-term. At Goldington Road, new income needs to be generated if it stays as it is. Without new donations and sponsorship or a new wealthy benefactor, it will not survive.

To make the Goldington Road site self-funding, it will require significant investment in order to provide the latest facilities. The pitch could be turned around to meet premiership league criteria, creating a floodlit 4G



pitch with covered stadiums and provide new facilities which could be hired out to all clubs in the evenings, weekends and holiday periods.

There is currently a long-standing noise restriction at Goldington Road as it's in a residential area. If the venue is still going to have facilities suitable for hiring i.e. hospitality events, such as evening parties, then a solution to potential noise pollution and associated restrictions must be found to attract more bookings and generate maximum income.

A possible solution could be that this could be funded by residential apartments and corporate hospitality boxes incorporated within a new stadium that would pay for the new 4G pitch and latest facilities, thereby providing a self-funding solution if approved.

Attendance/Access and development restrictions

There are significant issues which impact the concept of combined rugby at both Bedford rugby main sites:

1. Access and parking at Goldington Road is difficult and extremely limited.
2. Wentworth Drive which hosts the Bedford Aths, Swifts and Junior Blues cannot accommodate large events when other clubs visit for tournaments and has very restricted car parking. With over 600 Junior Blues, local residents frequently have genuine cause to complain to the Police about inconsiderate parking.
3. Girls' rugby is now becoming more popular, especially as the England team has just won the World Cup. It should be considered how in the long-term Bedford can accommodate higher profile girls' rugby.

The Summary for the future of rugby and Goldington Road

If the Blues were to start with a blank canvas and look to create facilities for the long-term security and growth of rugby in Bedford, what could it look like? Much can be gained by looking to Premier Clubs (i.e. Northampton and Leicester) for best practices and potential solutions.

Today, the current site of "Bedford Blues" at Goldington Road has been adequate but limiting for the number of spectators that the Club can attract. Goldington Road is synonymous with "Bedford Blues" and its history, however, there is an urgent need to improve the facilities and maximise the income that can be generated at the Goldington Road site for it to survive. Altering the layout of the pitch and erecting a new weatherproof stand would be beneficial. Building apartments overlooking the pitch, whilst incorporating covered stands and



corporate hospitality boxes are some great ideas that people have already come up with to provide income. But would this be sufficient for longer-term goals to be achieved?

Rugby Centre for Excellence – General Reaction

There are several alternative potential solutions to secure the optimum future of rugby in Bedford, however, it is generally accepted that the vision must have commercial stability by being **Self funding**. It must enhance the profile of Bedford rugby, becoming a focal point for all local rugby enthusiasts and players, both today and into the future and critically, provide the facilities to build a more secure and successful long-term future for rugby in the town.

A potential, more radical solution is to establish a new training site for the “Bedford Rugby Centre for Excellence”, where there would be enough facilities for all clubs to train.

The long term ideal location for the training ground would be a site of around 20 acres. The vision would have to be established on a firm business footing, consisting of 8 or 9 pitches, a club house, changing facilities for males and females of all ages and a significantly large parking area. Ideally other fitness facilities such as gym facilities and a swimming pool would benefit both players and the community at large (facilities hired out to the community to help generate an income). Most importantly, the venue should be sited within the Bedford Borough, located away from residential developments, but with excellent road access allowing for ease of local and national journeys, whilst within walking distance of both Bedford rail and bus station.

All sport is vital to our community as it welcomes and unites all ages and nationalities. Bedford is fortunate to have the widest number of nationalities in the UK. In addition, this facility would also be ideal for all other sports and community clubs to use the facilities and club house to create an enviable centre for the community in the Borough of Bedford and become a another focal enhancement to the attractions to Bedford.

Financial and Planning issues

As this consultation has uncovered the real urgent need for better training facilities, the next step is to investigate possible sites and funding opportunities. Additionally, it must be considered whether it is a feasible option to relocate the main pitch away from Goldington Road or how the current site can best be developed? There is potential funding available from the various sources including local businesses and charities, together with the opportunity to attract funding from sports organisations and the Lottery funding for this forward thinking community/sports project.



The long term vision to create a Bedford Rugby Centre of Excellence has been born from this 3 month consultation. It has been encouraging to see the momentum growing daily with clubs that have been divided for years, coming together and showing a sincere and strong desire to support this initiative.

This yet again demonstrates what is special about the Bedford community, recently Bedford just being announced as the most generous and giving town to charity in the UK in terms of donations per person.

The residents and businesses of Bedford Borough may well consider the development of a 'Rugby Centre of excellence' for their children and families as a worthwhile project to support financially. Bearing in mind children and adults of all ages will be able to access the fitness and clubhouse facilities and this would support community cohesion.

The real alternative

If the current Rugby Club is not financially supported by donations or by finding ways to make up the current losses it will close. **Therefore this is a one off opportunity for you to express your views as to whether you think it is beneficial to you, your family and future generations in Bedford to save it.**

If it is strongly felt that the vision of a "Bedford Rugby Centre of excellence" will enhance the prosperity and of the community of Bedford, then Bedford must find a way to embrace this to maximise opportunities and enrich future generations and the town.

Your views on the importance of rugby to Bedford are therefore requested

1. Please log on to www.markstrust.org/bedfordrugby and register your opinion. This will also give you the opportunity to add your comments.
2. You will be asked to enter your contact details as this may also be used to serve as a petition of opinion to influence potential financial supporters. However, your details will remain confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this consultation and will not be released to any third party.
3. **Registration will close by midnight on 30th October 2014.**
4. **Based on this response a final report will be sent to interested parties which may be used to create the strategy, although it will be up to the clubs to decide whether to adopt any proposed strategy.**

Disclaimer:

Please note this is an informal consultation document prepared by The Marks Trust, a Bedford charity with the objective of improving facilities for the community of Bedford. It has been carried out on the request of Bedford Blues board and a number of local business leaders who required a wider community consultation. This does not necessarily represent the views of Bedford Blues, it's management or any other club or individual or the Marks Trust. Any facts, opinions, ideas or omissions presented in this document are provided in good faith and have not been validated.



The Marks Trust has no direct interests in and is not part of the rugby club in any way. It has agreed to fund this 3 month exercise, donate time and services in order to provide an impartial and independent review. The findings will be gathered and summarised to ensure that the Bedford Borough and the rugby clubs, schools and universities understand your views on the importance rugby plays within the community of Bedford.

This document has been developed with consultation of over 100 people so far which include:

Gareth Alred – General Manager Bedford Blues

Rob Ashton – Bedford Tigers

Tim Ayles – Chairman Bedford Queens

Denver Bennett – Chairman Sharnbrook and Colworth Rugby Club

Kevin Breeze – Chairman Bedford Junior Blues

Marcus Buckle – Director of Rugby, Bedford Junior Blues

Jenna Campbell-Butcher – University Student studying Marketing and Business

Ian Carlisle – Former Chief Executive of a PLC

Ian Daniel – Headmaster of Rushmoor and St Andrews School, East Midlands Referee and Bedford rugby coach

Nicholas Fenton Wells – Captain Bedford Blues

David Gunner – Board member Bedford Blues Ltd

Geoff Irvine – Chairman Bedford Blues Ltd

Oli Joisce – employed by Rugby Football Union and Bedford Athletic Rugby Coach

Chris Jordan – Honorary life member and past chairman of Bedford Athletic Rugby Club

Matt Litchfield – Chairman, Bedford Swifts RUFC

Leigh Mansell – Chairman of former Bedford Blues players

Roger Marks – Managing Director Aeromark – Trustee of The Marks Trust

David Owen - CEO Deloitte & Touche CIS Moscow

Richard Parish – Honorary life member of Bedford Athletic Rugby Club and East Midland Rugby Referee.

Neil Patterson – Bedford Athletic Club captain

James Pritchard – Bedford Blues former Captain and 11 years representing Bedford Blues

Dave Rawlinson – Accountant Rawlinson Pryde & Partners

Mike Rayer – Director of Rugby Bedford Blues Ltd

Tony Sabey – Accountant Bedford Blues Ltd

Francis Shiner – Managing Director SDC Builders Ltd

James Stonor – Managing Director Stonbury Ltd

Peter Smith – Board member Bedford Blues Ltd

David Twigden – Twigden Asset Management Ltd

Ben Whetstone – Player recruitment Agency -Finsbury Designs Ltd

Chris Wright – Treasurer Bedford Junior Blues

Please add your views by visiting www.markstrust.org/bedfordrugby

