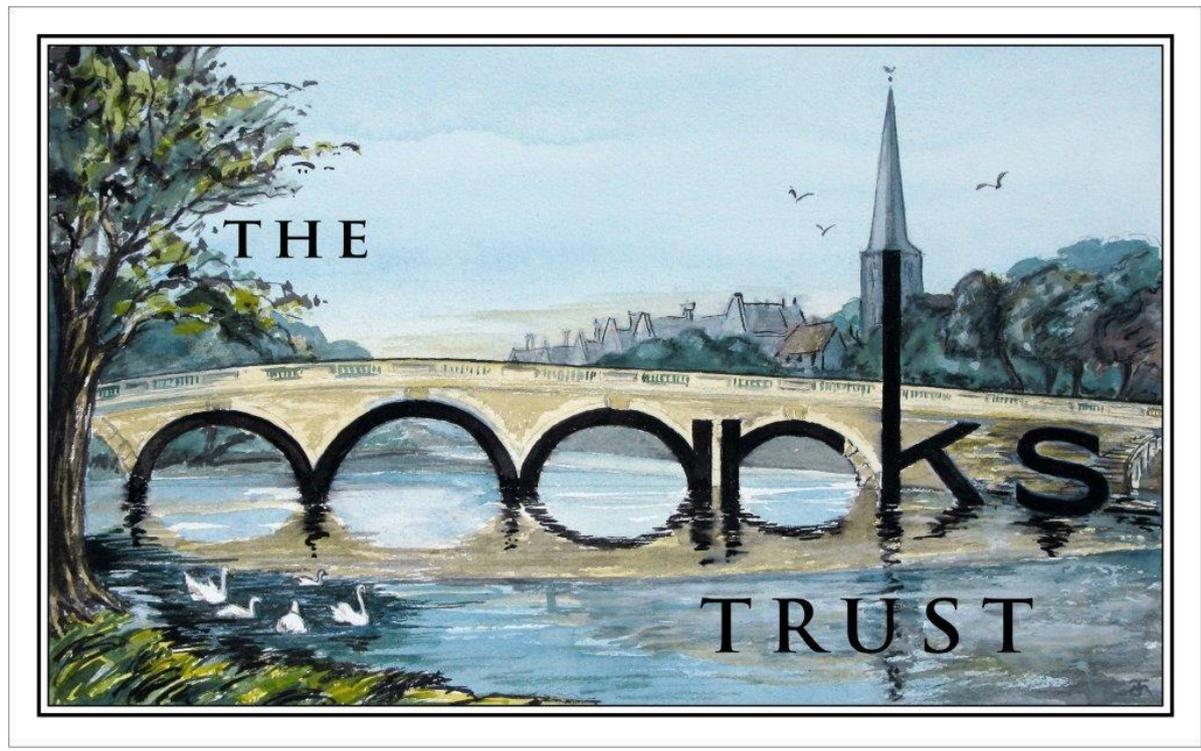


RESULTS FROM THE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF RUGBY IN BEDFORD

PREPARED BY



The Marks Trust

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

February 2015

THE FUTURE OF RUGBY IN BEDFORD

INTRODUCTION:

At the request of Bedford Blues, towards the end of 2014, The Marks Trust carried out a survey into the future of Rugby in Bedford. The response to the on-line survey was surprisingly larger than expected, and as a result has taken longer to review all comments and compile the results into a summary report.

As explained in the consultation document, which can be found at www.markstrust.org/bedfordrugby, the Marks Trust agreed to run the survey with the aim of independently asking a wide audience whether Bedford valued its Rugby Club and felt it was an important asset to the Borough.

Whilst The Marks Trust has carried out this survey on behalf of Bedford Rugby Club, for the record, neither the Marks Trust nor its Trustees, have any commercial interest in any rugby club. Its involvement therefore is purely to contribute to the research, review and preparation of an impartial and independent view of how important rugby is to Bedford, which in turn should help interested parties make more informed decisions.

This was a standalone project for which in November 2014, I met with the Board of Bedford Blues and passed the comments submitted during the Consultation relating to Bedford Rugby Club. I hope the comments and genuine support will enable the Bedford Rugby Club to consider the next steps to facilitate a successful transfer from the current Chairman, Geoff Irvine, who intends to retire in the summer of 2016.



Jo Marks
Chairman of the Trustees
The Marks Trust

BACKGROUND:

According to the Office of National Statistics projections, the population of Bedford Borough will grow to 191,000 by 2032 (a 20% increase from 2011), which will inflate demand for sports pitches and outdoor sports facilities.

It is generally agreed that it is important to promote the benefits of a healthy lifestyle with access to good sports facilities including pitches, which helps to encourage the local population to be physically active and increase its participation in sporting activities.

Information received from Bedford Borough Council, indicates that overall sports participation rates in Bedford (at least once a week) have fluctuated since 2005/6, and at 36.2% are currently above the regional, and national, averages of 35.5%. The general local trend is upwards, suggesting that demand for pitches and outdoor sports facilities will increase accordingly.

For Rugby Union in the Borough, there are understood to be in excess of 25 groups of rugby teams. There is limited scope for expansion at several clubs at present because of limited pitch capacity at key sites. The junior section of Bedford Blues has a membership of over 500 with a waiting list.

THE SURVEY RESULTS:

Question 1:

DO YOU AGREE THAT THE RUGBY CLUB IS A VALUABLE ASSET TO THE TOWN AND COMMUNITY AND SHOULD BE SAVED?

Of the respondents 98.2% said the Rugby Club must be saved. The general tone was that Bedford is known as a rugby town and respondents felt this it is very important to retain this level of activity.

Whilst there are a number of other local amateur rugby clubs in Bedfordshire, it is generally felt that Bedford Blues is an entirely separate facility that focuses on their league status in a commercial environment. Whilst it has some provisions for a professional club, it could benefit from improved facilities for spectators and corporate hospitality. The vision, however from supporters, is to provide a good afternoon's entertainment and play at a level in which Bedford Blues can compete - and ultimately win, rather than aiming for premier status at this time.

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If so, where should the Rugby Club be located?

Key issues regarding the limitations of the current Goldington Road site include the fact that the pitch slopes, there are insufficient covered stands and facilities that would benefit from modernisation. A suggestion regarding the pitch being turned around was a repeated theme, which would provide the ability for more seating and covered stands. This could also include corporate boxes and function rooms to help diversification, and in turn generate new income streams for the Club.

- 61% of respondents would like the Club to remain at Goldington Road, at least for the short to medium term.

The general consensus was that there would be no point moving from Goldington Road unless Bedford played at a level that would attract more than 4,000 people. This could only happen if the Club found a wealthy benefactor or the Council would pay for a brand new site and facilities.

It was considered vitally important for the town that Bedford Blues remains in Bedford and that the Club does not move out of the town as has recently happened to other clubs, for example, Wasps.

The response also generally endorsed that people enjoyed the atmosphere of the Goldington Road site as it was easily accessible, but would benefit from more parking.

- 17% would like to see Bedford Blues move to a larger site that remained within walking distance of the bus and rail station. This was mainly due to the requirement for more car parking facilities. It was suggested that we should find a site that was close, or had easy access, to a Park and Ride system to make it accessible for all, with bus facilities to serve commuters from the rail station to the new ground.

The comments supporting a move to an alternative site were that this could provide better covered stands and a larger site that could have an artificial pitch to extend hours of play. The facilities could then be opened up to other clubs and schools for community use.

- 12% thought it would be better moved to a ring road outside town for ease of access by car.
- Only 3% of respondents consider that it should merge with another facility/club and 7% had no preference.

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Many respondents commented passionately on the history of the Goldington Road site feeling that it has a friendly atmosphere of comradeship due to being in a small area. It was felt that by moving to a larger, more remote, site this may not be as easily accessible or have the same character.

Several business people suggested that it would make sense to retain the Club at Goldington Road for at least a 2 year period after the transition from Geoff Irvine to a new management team. This would enable a new business plan to be created, funding to be assured, the level of player to be reviewed and a plan for facilities and potential funding to be identified. The site location could then be re-evaluated with discussions with landowners and the Borough Council at this stage for the optimum site for the future.

Question 2:

DO YOU SUPPORT THE VISION OF A BEDFORD RUGBY CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR ALL RUGBY CLUBS TO BE ABLE TO USE?

96% of respondents agreed and there were lots of constructive ideas which are summarised below;

It is clear from the responses to this question that the Centre of Excellence is an inspiring vision that was felt Bedford should embrace as a community project.

All rugby clubs agreed that their current facilities did not meet the demand. Some clubs and schools said they did not have the pitches to play on. Some clubs also did not have adequate funding for long term survival.

There was a large amount of interest from schools, rugby clubs, and other communities that felt it would be an enormous asset to the town. Working towards a Centre of Excellence would positively enhance comradeship and boost development and tourism within the town. It would also be an ideal facility for all local clubs and schools with insufficient facilities to be able to train on. It would help sports scouts to easily identify future talent. All clubs could maintain their own identities and independence, but by uniting under one 'umbrella' it was generally agreed that they would benefit from having access to superior facilities whilst improving cost efficiency.

There were some concerns regarding old rivalries within Bedford's rugby community which might undermine its success, however, the overwhelming majority considered that working together would be universally beneficial for the future of rugby. This would be a great concept that should be well supported both by individuals, clubs and funding.

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Centre of Excellence for families and children:

It was identified from the survey that it is felt there are a lack of facilities for families and in particular for the younger generation.

Schools embraced the idea of a Centre of Excellence. Several wanted to offer rugby as a sport, but do not have the facilities, and other schools simply have insufficient pitches.

The Marks Trust was invited to speak at the Annual Conference of the Bedford Teachers' Association where Jo Marks asked all Head Teachers to help get the children's views on what they want to participate in and support. This was well received and she was asked to attend the PE Teachers' Conference, where Heads of PE Departments of schools in Bedfordshire met to discuss how we could progress rugby, including girls' rugby. Teachers felt the Rugby Club and Bedford Blues play an important part in children's lives and give them inspiration.

Many parents responded with their support saying that a Centre that focussed on all ages, and gave children of all abilities a chance to be involved in a team, would be welcomed and supported by them.

The Marks Trust was invited to speak to 250 students at Bedford Modern School to get their views. This surprisingly found some entrepreneurial youngsters who were so inspired by the opportunities that this could bring to Bedford that they took it upon themselves to contact local radio stations and media to get them involved.

Coaching and developing players:

Bedford has a history of excellent schooling in rugby and in producing world class players. With the opportunity of additional pitches, together with the wealth of expertise we have in local coaching, Bedford has the potential to excel. This in turn could give children more opportunity to participate in such a high profile sport, and there is no reason why we could not aim to have the best female rugby team in the country.

Rugby players and coaches said that there was no reason for every rugby club not to support a Centre of Excellence due to the benefits it would bring. Not only would it provide additional training and other facilities, to encourage and develop people of all ages, but also enhance the strong friendship and bonds that rugby brings as a sport.

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Comments from coaches in the County, and others, expressed many points on how a Centre of Excellence would assist in the training of all people of all ages. Specific examples of comments included:

- “Bedford is a rugby town and the school system promotes rugby in the area. The junior club players aspire to play for the town and a shared vision and shared coaching resources would benefit all the local clubs.”
- “This would allow the possible development of a route from youth teams to feed through an academy system, to the main club(s)”
- “To attract top players and reach higher standards this would be of great benefit.”
- “A wide range of playing levels are needed to encompass all playing abilities.”
- “This would make sense so that the players can be streamed so the best go to the championship team, but all the players have the opportunity of (a) a game, and (b) a chance to compete for a top team place.”
- “If the Centre of Excellence has the power to unite all of Bedford’s rugby clubs then the future of rugby in Bedford is indeed rosy”
- **“The excitement that this survey has generated within our teams has really united us and made us think about our town and its future and really it is up to us to help mould the future of what we want for the next generation. It means a bit more thinking and doing, but what a difference it would make if we achieved this together”**

Equal opportunities:

There has been an increasing amount of interest in women’s rugby highlighted by England’s recent win in the Women’s Rugby World Cup. Comments were made that the game is entering a new phase and the rugby clubs need to move with the times to promote not just women’s rugby, but also to encompass all playing abilities, disabilities, gender, age, ethnicity and culture. In turn bringing opportunities to unite, develop and strengthen the diverse population and distinctive cultures of Bedford.

Pooling resources:

There are many small amateur clubs offering rugby to children and adults. However, it was clear many are struggling with inadequate pitches and do not have the facilities to accommodate spectators and/or meeting places.

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Sports clubs also expressed a desire to join in the idea of a Centre of Excellence as many too have limited facilities and would welcome suitable match and meeting places for spectators. Pooling resources and giving them access to top rated equipment, rather than only having what their budgets can provide, would benefit many members of the sporting community within Bedford Borough and the surrounding areas.

Some local schools do not have the facilities to train or play rugby within their premises, and a Centre of Excellence would allow the town to embrace the sport much more readily.

Other:

The main consensus was that the modern competitive rugby played at all levels within the town would be enhanced through a Centre of Excellence.

According to the Blues, there are 600 young people aged between 5 and 16 that have enrolled as Junior Blues, who play at Bedford Athletic Rugby Club. These aspiring Bedford Blues currently only have 5 pitches to play on. Bedford Athletic urgently require extra pitches to facilitate the demand for rugby and already, as a result of publicity surrounding this exercise, the Council have provided the use of another pitch at Mowsbury Park.

While this survey was rugby driven there was also a feeling that the Centre of Excellence would benefit other sports, improving sporting achievement across all pitch sports such as football, athletics, cricket, hockey, tennis and golf.

Where could the Centre of Excellence be located?

The responses are grouped as follows:

- It was important that any future centre is based somewhere for the ease of access in particular for Parents; most importantly it must have adequate parking. Ideally it could be within walking distance of bus and train links.
- The main issue was seen as the challenge of locating a site that can fit in at least seven pitches whilst providing adequate parking for the regular users and visiting players.
- As a result of this survey, many discussions and site reviews three sites have been identified. Over the past weeks we have been assisting with viability options on each of these reviewing the potential of each site.
- In turn several individuals have offered to help with funding opportunities to make this a reality if this is wholly supported by the Borough. It would create something

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really compelling in Bedford for future generations and to enhance the town's prosperity.

- Ongoing discussions are taking place to secure a suitable site. Subject to Bedford Borough Council approving a scheme, this has the potential to be developed by the town to progress into its second phase which would be a feasibility study to assess the support, demand and sustainability. The Marks Trust is not part of this but will assist where possible if required.

Questions 3, 4 and 5: WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY?

Age Demographics

There were over 2,000 responses from a wide range in age groups which included parents, grandparents, children, supporters, coaches and businesses. The distribution was as follows:

	Female	Male	Total %
Age	%	%	
1-10	0.15%	0.51%	0.66%
11-18	5.29%	10.02%	15.31%
18-25	2.03%	3.56%	5.60%
26-40	6.21%	13.73%	19.94%
41-55	7.99%	26.09%	34.08%
55+	3.76%	20.65%	24.42%
Grand Total	25.43%	74.57%	100.00%

General Demographics:

- 52% of respondents were individual and business supporters of the various rugby clubs
- 16% were parents / family members
- 13% played for a club or were former players or coached rugby
- 19% were still in education.

Question 6:

WHAT ADDITIONAL FACILITIES DO YOU THINK ARE NEEDED IN BEDFORD?

This question was left open to get views on what the respondents think is needed in Bedford or that it would benefit from. The top 5 suggestions are listed as follows:

- 26% would like an indoor arena to enable sport to be played all year round.
- 25% would like a large venue for functions with good facilities.
- 23% would like an additional health and fitness centre
- 12% would like another swimming pool
- And 7% would like to see more pubs

The remaining suggestions included:

- A velodrome
- A training facility to encourage a professional sports industry/sports injury clinic
- An ice rink
- A multi-purpose sports centre to accommodate Martial Arts
- An improved library
- A theatre
- A water park
- A venue for large music events
- A youth centre
- A country club

Again from the enormous amount of supporting comments and suggestions it is clear that respondents want to support improvements to Bedford with many offering their time to help achieve this if directed.

Summary of the Public Survey:

A very interesting comment from one 16 year old student seems to encompass so many peoples' views:

“The town centre itself looks extremely dull and that's coming from a 16 year old!

We need to liven up the town and either build new centres which will attract outside interest or simply renovate the existing centres we have.

If people like a facility in Bedford then this will attract interest for our other facilities and so by being renowned for a ‘new, modern, and top of the line sports centre’ Bedford will have a larger impact towards sports fans all over the country.

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At least having one excellent facility will lead to more business opportunities and general public interest. I know for myself that the sports centres we have in Bedford are not adequate.

As a very sporty person I find myself always going miles out of town to participate in events where the host town has an excellent facility. Bedford at the moment isn't keeping up with that level however, it has a lot more potential than the average town and so with a little creativity and investment, we can together build new facilities, (not necessarily sports) and build our reputation.

This will enable Bedford to be a place full of business opportunity as well as public satisfaction which I believe is achievable.”

Other consultation results:

In addition to the public survey a number of meetings and information has been provided which include:

Key Challenges Identified:

- **Financial** – Public sector funding reductions.
- **Geographical** – review of existing and potential new site uses and nearby residential/business settlements.
- **Logistical** – Road network, car parking, pedestrian access.

Primary Solutions:

- **Joint Funding** – Pooling risk and reward.
- **Innovative and Sustainable Design** – Adapting to, and complementing, existing surroundings.
- **Car parking and Public Transport** – Utilise as much on site car parking facilities or work on a partnership basis with other local sites, while also encouraging public transport and pedestrian access.

General Influencing Factors / Comments:

- Sport has been, and will continue to be, a growth industry.
- Bedford Borough requires new jobs to meet its growing population.
- There is a University in Bedford with a particular focus on sport and sport science.
- Bedford has a championship rugby club, whose current ground does not meet Premiership entry requirements which may wish to be reviewed in the future, dependant on available funding and playing ability.
- Bedford has a non-league football club, whose current location hampers attendance and does not boost the town centre economy.

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- Bedford Borough Council already owns the land at Barkers Lane and the land at Meadow Lane (Bedford Town FC home ground). Many felt the Council should be involved
- A new bus station and the new by-pass will improve public transport links.

General wish-list:

- A state of the art facility, which provides top class training and playing environments.
- A well designed and high quality facility that changes people's perceptions about what Bedford can achieve (many commented on how Bedford had deteriorated over the past 30 years when Bedford was a prime employment town, the High Street booming with excellent facilities. Now employment sites have been replaced with houses, and facilities are second rate compared with other towns.)
- A ground that brings Bedford Town FC back into the heart of the town and the community.
- A facility that improves, broadens and deepens access to sport, and sports facilities, in Bedford Borough.
- A sports village/Centre of Excellence that stimulates wider partnerships with the University of Bedfordshire, and the private sector, to generate new jobs in the fields of sports science, management and business.
- A project that delivers value for money for taxpayers and does not lead to ongoing subsidies from the Council or private investors.
- A facility that generates significantly higher match day and non-match day revenue, to achieve a self-sustaining funding situation within 5 years.

SO HOW CAN YOU HELP?

There are clearly 2 separate projects:

1. Save the Bedford Rugby Club

How can you help?

- ❖ Simply go and support the Club and watch a match
- ❖ Businesses can support the Club by buying a sponsorship package from signage to a corporate box.
- ❖ If you can donate any funding or expertise or wish to be part of the rugby club's future management please contact Geoff Irvine directly at the rugby club.

Several comments have been made that individuals and businesses may consider funding but only if it was to enhance facilities and contribute to its future, rather than to mitigate its current losses. Already in the last few months, due to increased support, the financial situation has vastly improved, and with your continued support the club will go from strength to strength.

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A number of individuals have said they would need to discuss this with other Directors or partners. In order to consider this, people have asked the Marks Trust for further information. This includes the current business plan and cash flow with identified opportunities to show what funding and support is needed and when. These can be obtained directly from the rugby club.

If you are part of a successful business in Bedfordshire, or an individual, who might be interested in help funding the rugby club then please contact Geoff Irvine at the rugby club for further information, but please act now before it's too late!

2. How to progress the possibility of a Centre of Excellence?

From this survey has come your ideas for the creation of a Centre of Excellence. This will require action by interested parties to bring to fruition.

IN SUMMARY OF THIS SURVEY:

This survey has not detailed all your comments relating to the rugby club, which we will incorporate in a separate report that will be forward to the rugby club for their consideration.

In terminating our participation in this survey, the Marks Trust would like to thank everyone for their contribution and comments, and hope the results of which will lead to a successful conclusion.