

RESPONSE FROM SHAFTESBURY BARNET HARRIERS AND BARNET & DISTRICT ATHLETIC CLUB

We acknowledge the asset and potential of Copthall open space and welcome the Council's decision to prepare a Master Plan for the space.

Copthall is the home of Shaftesbury Barnet Harriers (SBH) with over 100 members being present on Sunday 26 July 1964 when the track opened. SBH is one of the premier athletic clubs in the Country for track & field, cross country and road. The Club boasts 37 Olympians since 1972 as well as many more Commonwealth Games and World Championship athletes out of a current membership of around 500

Currently the club has about 150 young athletes regularly training at Allianz Park often two or three times each week. SBH also has its own clubhouse with a 30 year lease at the southern end of the stadium which it allows both Middlesex University and Saracens to use free of charge on a regular basis.

The stadium is home to Barnet & District Athletic Club (BDAC) which also has a long history of training and competing at Allianz Park, and in providing an alternative offer to SBH. The stadium is also the home of athletics for most if not all the schools in Barnet and is the only venue suitable for inter-school competitions in the Borough.

The stadium provides an important local, regional and national facility for athletic competitions. With the exception of the Olympic Stadium, Allianz Park is the premier venue for athletics in London. Working in partnership with Saracens, a high-quality facility has been created which supports and nurtures club and school athletics, as well as regional competitions.

Despite all the above the Master Plan documents contains little or no real reference to Athletics or any material reference to the usage of the facilities by schools, clubs and the community other than a cursory comment made by SBH members at the consultation meetings; "Shaftesbury Barnet Harriers supportive of the better footpaths and routes proposed. They currently use Sunny Hill Park for training." (Page 125) and a reference at a meeting with Saracens on 12 May 2017 where Saracens advised the consultants that they "Host 2 Athletic clubs" (Page 118).

No official approach or consultation was carried out with either SBH (even though they have a leasehold interest) or BDAC. We found this very disappointing particularly as meetings were held with both rugby clubs who, with due respect, have significantly less use of the facilities in terms of numbers of participating members.

It is understood that the consultants also met with Saracens and the Rugby Football Union. Given the importance of Allianz Park to local, regional and national athletics, it seems surprising and disappointing that the consultants did not seek to formally consult with the National Governing Bodies, England Athletics / UK Athletics.

SBH & BDAC therefore requested an urgent meeting to put our case due to what appears to be the virtual complete failure to take into account the long term future of athletics on the Copthall site. This is of great concern to the clubs. We are grateful to Dennis Holmes and Cassie Bridger for agreeing to meet us on 26 June 2018 to discuss our concerns.

What is also worrying, is that the document makes reference to Saracens with a new stand would have capacity for 15,000 (Page 118). Whilst this may be technically correct, the actual planning permission granted states that capacity will be 10,500

after the new stand is built with an ability to increase the capacity to 15,000 on 2 occasions out of the 16 home matches in a rugby season. However, when this happens it puts the track out of commission for virtually 2 weeks at a time. We are unclear whether the document merely refers to the temporary capacity twice a year or a longer-term vision for the Master Plan. This has real implications for athletics.

The report also states that the number of people who attend matches at Allianz Park annually is 750,000, this is an impossible figure as it equates to over 14,400 per week for 52 weeks of the year.

It is useful to note that the “regular” athletic competition season runs for six months from the beginning of April to the end of September. When the new East stand was constructed in 2012 we agreed to the loss of April and September for competitions as per the S106 agreement which stated that the track would be operational by the beginning of May. This has never been achieved and effectively the season for athletics at Allianz Park starts in June and ends in August, thus cutting three months out of the six-month season. This is even worse for schools as their season ends in July when the school term ends. Any further encroachment on the athletics season will effectively end the viability of athletic competitions at Allianz Park.

It has been widely reported in the press that Saracens are losing millions of pounds each year. Their current economic model is clearly not sustainable. Saracens have a long lease and are obviously a key factor if the future viability of the proposed Master Plan and if its vision is to be realised. In order to break even, Saracens will clearly need to increase their capacity – perhaps to 15,000 or more for every match. This would make the use of the stadium impossible for both athletics and rugby on a fit for purpose basis. For instance the track is already reduced to four lanes in rugby mode which proves extremely challenging for both athletic clubs.

Rugby is also actively considering extending their season beyond the middle of May towards the end of June. This would reduce the full-time athletics use of the stadium from the three months to less than two months and hence inoperable for both sports.

On face value these issues may not seem to be Planning Policy / Master Planning issues. However, the vision for Copthall needs to set out how both rugby and athletics can survive successfully and hopefully continue to operate in partnership for the greater good. Realistically this may well mean that the athletics track needs to be removed from within the stadium, a proposal that may be welcomed by Saracens. However, in terms of the athletic clubs, school, regional and national athletics it is critical that a fit for purpose alternative is made available. The only way this could be adequately achieved is through the provision of a new track with appropriate associated facilities i.e. club house/changing rooms and toilets.

We already have limited usage of the track for both training during the rugby season and during a shortened athletic season. The report states that as the LBB population grows there’s a need for more community space. We agree and believe that Copthall, with the right facilities will lead to increased athletics / fitness usage by all the community. As it is, there are insufficient days when Allianz Park is in athletics mode for all LBB schools to be able to book the facility for Sports Day events let alone training days. Encouraging the community, and in particular young people, to participate in athletics activities can only benefit the health, opportunities and well-being of the LBB population as a whole.

The draft report, in its present format, begs the question ‘does the London Borough of Barnet want to provide the option of athletics activities for all its residents’?