

It is now more than twelve months since the search began for a suitable site upon which to develop a replacement stadium for Rotherham United F.C. Ltd. All the sites so far considered involve significant public infrastructure works on new access roads, railway bridges etc, and are in poor locations from a sustainable travel point of view.

During Mr Dennis Coleman's chairmanship of the Club the local press reported that the Borough Council was in direct negotiations with the Booth family with the aim of purchasing the Millmoor football ground, and developing it into a community stadium. Reference was made to matters progressing as far as detailed valuations, and then negotiations were suspended when RUFC Ltd took legal action in respect of its lease arrangement with the Booth family. Given the lack of progress on finding a suitable alternative site, the Rotherham District Civic Society believes it is time for reconsideration of the Millmoor option, and as with the Civic Office project, sustainability is at the heart of our reasoning.

There are a number of reasons why the Council, in particular, should take a more pro-active role in this issue. The Council, as a supporter of the Government's sustainability agenda should be concerned about the waste of natural resources and embedded carbon which would result from the demolition of the main stand so soon after it was constructed. The sustainability agenda also includes taking action to reduce dependency on the use of the private car. It is no coincidence that Millmoor was for over one hundred years the home of Rotherham County and then Rotherham United. It is a very good location for a football ground being within easy walking distance of the transport interchange and the railway station, and close to many principal bus routes.

The Council as Local Planning Authority has a key role. The Millmoor Ground is allocated in the current Unitary Development Plan as 'Community Facilities - Leisure'. The Council has the power to maintain this allocation and to make it clear to the Booth family that permission for a departure from this allocation will be resisted.

There has been talk of spending up to £20.0m on a new stadium plus public infrastructure costs; this would saddle the football club and the Council with debt for a generation. Millmoor on the face of it could be turned into a decent stadium by completing the main stand, laying out the car park, and rebuilding the Millmoor Lane stand. There is no obvious need for public infrastructure works. The Council could facilitate the redevelopment of the Millmoor Lane stand by assisting with the relocation of business tenants from the former Heatons Bathworks onto land or property owned by the Council.

Mr Tony Stewart is known to want additional leisure facilities alongside the new stadium in order to underpin the commercial operation of the Club. Why not at Masbrough? Has anyone spoken to the Booth family about the potential for reorganisation of their property and the likely financial benefits of a major regeneration of the area? With a bit of imagination, major new facilities built in and around Millmoor could be linked into the Town Centre 'Renaissance' - something which could not be said of any of the alternative sites. Indeed

Councillor Smith has been recently quoted in the local press as advocating the Pool Green roundabout improvement scheme so as to improve connections between Masbrough and the town centre.

The Society understands that the Council has the legal power, under Part 1 of the Local Government Act 2000, to incur expenditure on what is broadly categorised as 'promoting the economic, social, and environmental well being of the area'. The regeneration of Millmoor and its surroundings would score on all of these. It is not known how far the Council's powers of compulsory purchase extend but the Society would simply draw the parallel with the Bellows Road Shopping Centre. This was recently compulsorily purchased on the basis that it was a community asset which had suffered decline in private hands. Millmoor surely fits exactly the same criteria, and should be considered for CPO action if a satisfactory agreement cannot be reached with the Booth family. It may even be a quicker solution to undertake a CPO and complete the refurbishment of Millmoor than to acquire a new site, establish its planning status through the myriad of environmental, traffic impact statements etc, and then build the stadium.