

Mr Sam Younger
Chief Executive
Charity Commission

Dear Mr Younger

FUTURE OF THE RECREATION GROUND IN BATH

The Federation of Bath Residents Associations represents 25 separate residents' associations in central and outer Bath, and our affiliate members include the two university Student Unions, the Bath Bus Users Group and the Bath Independent Guest Houses Association. We are the only broad-based group that can claim to speak on behalf of residents throughout the city. All our members are based in Bath, and are therefore bona fide beneficiaries of the Recreation Ground Trust.

We have followed recent developments over the future of the Rec with concern, and have held numerous meetings about it with the Chief Executive of Bath Rugby, and with the Rec Trust, B&NES Councillors and senior officers. We believe we are reasonably well-informed about this subject. Our aim is that there should be a satisfactory solution in the interest of residents, and which safeguards the future of professional rugby in Bath, and of the Leisure Centre.

The Rec Trust meeting on 7 July agreed to make a submission to the Charity Commission asking them to publish a Scheme which will:

- Regularise the legal position of the Leisure Centre on the Rec;
- Permit the grant of a new lease to Bath Rugby;
- Compensate for this lease by acquiring Lambridge for the beneficiaries of the Trust.

I am sure you are aware that there has been much concern in Bath about the way in which the Trust's recent consultation about land use at the Rec was handled. Many residents have expressed concern about the way the consultation document was distributed and publicised. The process appears to us to be designed to create momentum such that any eventual planning decision becomes a formality, as there will be only one possible plan. This removes the normal democratic checks which should be imposed on a development of this importance.

Like many others, we consider that the numerical majority of respondents to the consultation who were in favour of the Trust's proposals is meaningless when no check was possible as to whether these people are beneficiaries of the Trust. We believe it is not too late for the Commission to recover some of the ground lost by this flawed approach, by mounting a fresh consultation on its Scheme, with proper tests as to the identity and location of respondents. Once the responses are in, a check should then be made as to how many of them are, or represent, beneficiaries of the Trust, and these people's views given precedence.

PROMOTING RESIDENTS' INTERESTS IN BATH

We are particularly concerned that the proposal on which the Trust consulted offers no security for the future of the Leisure Centre, other than regularising its legal existence on the Rec. This is helpful, but we don't believe that the Commission was likely to require the Centre to be removed, so it does not take us very far forward. We think the most realistic way to safeguard the Leisure Centre's future is for it to be redeveloped in a joint project with the rugby stadium, an option which seemed to be on the table until a very few months ago.

Meanwhile, the relatively modest development of the rugby ground foreseen in the consultation is quite inconsistent with several public statements by the owner and chief executive of Bath Rugby about their long-term ambitions for a much larger stadium on the Rec. We are concerned that, if the proposal is approved, the Rugby Club will very soon come back for an even larger development, and that, if the Leisure Centre is left out, this will take over even more of the important green space of the Rec.

We think that the only way to prevent a slide towards this gobbling up of the Rec is for any Scheme to impose a new restrictive covenant on the Rec and the land leased to Bath Rugby, to ensure that the position agreed now is definitive, and cannot be modified in a very few years. We envisage a covenant between these parties and the residents of Bath, to the effect that the space which remains open on the Rec after the proposed development should never be built upon. This will need to run with the land, so that any successor parties are equally bound by it.

In summary, we ask the Charity Commission:

- to hold a meaningful local consultation on its new Scheme for the Rec,
- to ensure that the identity and location of respondents can be properly identified, so that the views of beneficiaries of the Trust take precedence; and
- to put forward a new restrictive covenant, to prevent any further development of the Rec.

We should be very pleased to meet you or your staff to discuss these matters if that would help.

I am copying this letter to Dave Dixon, chairman of the Rec Trust, to John Everitt and Glen Chipp in B&NES Council, and to Nick Blofeld at Bath Rugby.

Yours sincerely,

HENRY BROWN,
Chairman