

CA 05

Ymgynghoriad ar asedau cymunedol

Consultation on community assets

Ymateb gan: Friends of the Mid

Response from: Friends of the Mid

Inquiry into community assets: Friends of the Mid



1. Friends of the Mid

Friends of the Mid is a community group established in August 2020. It's stated objectives are:

1. To respect and preserve the Mid-Rhondda Athletic Field's unique historical and cultural heritage for future generations.
2. To secure and develop the ground as a resource for the whole community of Mid-Rhondda.

The group was formed by three local people following a conversation with the Councillor for Tonypany who informed them that an option for low-density housing was being considered for the field. As it appeared to be the only option the group was established to provide an alternative.

2. Historical Background

The Mid Rhondda Athletic Field was opened in 1903 and boasts a rich sporting and cultural history. For example, during the Ely Pit strike of 1910 a telegram from Home Secretary Winston Churchill was read to a massed meeting of striking miners by the stipendiary magistrate Lleufer Thomas before they marched on the Glamorgan Colliery power house. Keir Hardy brought Andrew

Fisher, Prime Minister of Australia, to the ground to speak words of support to those same miners. International matches have been played there and the ground has been graced by some of the greatest players ever to wear a Welsh shirt, like Willie Llewellyn, Percy Bush, and Maurice Richards. A potted online history of the ground can be found at: bit.ly/MidEbook as the result of a collaboration with local schools, Heritage Lottery and MensShed.

We also set up our own web page: www.friendsoftthemid.com and Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/Save-the-Mid-Rhondda-Athletic-Field-105396034426847>

3. Community Response and Statutory Rights

The ground is embedded in the psyche of the community and generations have played there, more recently for Tonypany Grammar School, local primary schools, at County Sports, or simply as a place of recreation. We undertook an online survey and received 266 responses, 262 of which were positive and offered suggestions of what activities they would like to see made available. We also gathered almost 400 signatures from local people in support of our bid to save the Mid from housing development. Based on these responses we created a possible model for development.



I asked our local Councillor whether we could buy the field outright for the community. We were told the council had to be run like a business and our bid would inevitably be gazumped by big development companies like Persimmons or Redrow. This is where we first encountered a difficulty specific to voluntary groups in Wales that was identified by the Institute of Welsh Affairs in their document 'Making Wales Better'.
"Local groups in Wales have no statutory rights. In England councils have to maintain a

list of assets of community value. Community groups in Scotland have a right of first refusal.”

4. Eliciting Support



4.1 We were told our plans were unaffordable but we explained that if we could secure a lease we could begin to plan the development in stages. We had already spoken to funders like, ‘The Heritage Lottery’, ‘The Coalfields Regeneration Trust’, Awards for All’ and while they were supportive nothing could be done until Friends of the Mid had been granted a long term lease on the ground, a classic Catch-22 situation. One of my old friends who had been extremely successful in business declined an invite to become involved as he didn’t want to spend his time ‘chasing windmills’. Had we been in a position of ‘first refusal’ his response, I am sure, would have been very different.

4.2 Wales Co-op were extremely helpful in enabling us to become a Social Benefit Society with our own bank account. We also received expressions of support from prominent figures like Maurice Richards (Wales and Salford), Professor Dai Smith (social historian), Catrin Collier (author), John Geraint (film producer), Karl-James Langford (archaeologist), Alun Pugh (Labour Minister for ‘Culture, Language and Sport, in Rhodri Morgan’s Welsh Assembly), Elizabeth ‘Buffy’ Williams MS and Heledd Fychan MS - who also visited the ground.

5. The Community Asset Transfer Process

5.1 Our next step was to set in motion the ‘Community Asset Transfer Process’. We were put in touch with ‘RCT Together’ team described as *‘the Council’s forward thinking approach to working in partnership with residents and communities’*. The RCT Together team explained they would help us through the asset transfer process of ‘taking over’ the ground. We were asked on several occasions whether we would consider having half the ground while the other half was made available for development. We adamantly opposed such a compromise. Our subsequent experience again accurately reflected the statement made by the Institute of Welsh Affairs in their document ‘Making Wales Better’ under the section ‘Our Land Communities and Land Use’ that, *“those wanting to take over local assets face an arduous and demoralising process that seems almost designed to keep assets out of community control. It is extremely likely that many local assets have been lost.”*

5.2 The initial ‘CAT Expression of Interest Form’ was fairly straightforward and we were accepted as one of the ‘known parties interested in developing the site.”

Land Address	Site Photo	Site aerial map	Description/Notes	Opening Date	Closing Date
Mid Rhondda Playing Fields Gelli Rd, Tonypandy, RCT, CF40 1DB UPRN 90413			<p>This land has not currently been declared surplus by RCT Council.</p> <p>However, known parties are interested in developing the site.</p> <p>The Council's Corporates Estates team advise there are no known restrictions on permitted uses, albeit part of the site may be</p>	11/08/2021	10/09/2021

However, the detail required for the business plan as set out in the 'CAT Business Plan Outline' was intimidating. Fortunately our secretary had spent his life setting up social business enterprises so we were not discouraged although we recognised a challenging task lay ahead. The two other interested parties progressed to the business planning stage were 'The Coalfield Flower Farm' and 'Rhondda Netball'.

5.3 It was during the 'Initial joint Support Meeting via TEAMS' that took place on Thursday 28th October 2021 we began to realise the enormity of the task our small voluntary community group faced. In attendance were:

- the three groups who had been progressed;
- relevant officers including, the Leisure & Parks Facility Development Manager, the Senior Estates Surveyor, the Head of Major Development & Investment, the Prosperity & Development Planner, and the Green Spaces Development Officer;
- the councillor for Tonypandy;
- a funding officer from the National Lottery;
- members of the RCT Together team;
- and a business adviser from the Social Business Wales – Wales Co-op.

5.4 A brief overview of the community asset transfer process to date was explained. Whilst the land at Mid Rhondda Playing Fields had not yet been declared surplus, due to the fact that an informal enquiry was originally received from Friends of the Mid, the Council agreed to advertise the opportunity via its 30 Day Window process. Each group in turn submitted an overview of their proposal. Our secretary stated that the Mid Rhondda Athletic Field has a rich heritage and as the group have undertaken extensive community surveys, they wish to keep this for community use, whatever that may be. This could include working closely with local Mens and Womens Shed groups for growing activities, opportunities for exercise, heritage focus etc. Following the submissions it was announced that all 3 groups were being formally invited through to the next stage i.e. Submission of an evidenced and costed business plan which would need to be underpinned by the relevant feasibility/specialist checks required to support our individual or collaborative proposal. Proposals would need to demonstrate they were viable,

sustainable and there was clear evidenced need for them. Due to the need for some seasonal ecological studies which could only happen between May and August, each group was given until next September 2022 to submit this information at the earliest.

5.5 Business Plan Advice and Guidance

RCT Together recommended that the 3 groups look to explore working collaboratively in the first instance to be able to draw down funding to support any planning advice and feasibility studies we may require. The expectation for accessing the CAT fund is that is one group applies for example for Pre-Planning Advise and would share the outcomes between all groups. This fund would not support 3 duplicate applications and would require a collaborative approach in the first instance.

Corporate Estates informed us that the preferred tenant(s) would be responsible for the site including the supporting wall on site and would need to follow the appropriate planning process. All costs associated with establishing the site, services infrastructure and ongoing maintenance and statutory compliance would become the responsibility of the tenant.

Planning advised that appropriate risk assessments would need to be undertaken and likely a Phase 1 habitat survey would also need to be undertaken but this could be addressed if the 3 groups collaborated and had requested pre-planning application service (bespoke or national). Planning further advised that there are varying fees depending on the size and scale of the proposals i.e. large or major. If a major development, then a pac report (community involvement exercise to canvas support).

The head of **Major Development** explained that the expectation from the Council Development team is we would need to take the same stringent approach as commercial property developers and would need to buy in specialist advice. He confirmed it would be expected that we would need to use qualified experts including ecologists, structural engineers etc. He further confirmed that due to the known drainage issues on the site, the Councils Flood Risk Management Team also advise, looking at the potential development it would require a sustainable drainage scheme compliant with the WG Mandatory Standards and SAB Approval. For a feasibility/viability for a detailed business case they suggest as a minimum that a Sustainable Drainage Strategy is included that demonstrates how the site will meet the mandatory standards.

It was also strongly suggested that, at a minimum the business case is accompanied by 'Drainage Strategy Review by SAB' (Paid Service)

- This service is intended for sites where design is at its early stage.
- This service will review a drainage strategy and is not intended for detailed review of calculations and design of drainage systems.
- The outcome is a summary report that will provide a review of a drainage strategy in relation to the National Standards.
- The report will also include a summary of what is required for the

submitted application to constitute as a validly made application.

5.6 Support Funding

The **National Lottery** representative explained that National Lottery has capital development funding of up to £50k or 10% of total project cost. The funding can support the planning permission phase, surveys and getting the lease for the land. However they would need to be clear who the preferred/proposed tenant is. They will not fund this development until someone has been given the go ahead to proceed.

This response encapsulated our dilemma. In order to proceed we would need substantial funding to 'facilitate the same stringent approach as commercial property developers' in formulating our business plan. Bodies like the National Lottery would consider capital development funding but only once we had been given the go ahead to proceed.

6. Confirmation Email

Following the meeting we received an email from the RCT Together Team confirming what had been discussed. It read:

"Further to your recent "Expression of Interest" for Mid Rhondda Playing Field, we write to inform you that Friends of the Mid and a further two organisations are being invited through to the next stage of the Community Asset Transfer process which requires submission of a fully costed and evidenced business plan along with any necessary feasibility study/surveys required to obtain planning permission for your proposal. Each group will have until next September 2022 to submit their detailed proposals. This will enable each group to:

- Undertake the necessary community consultation to evidence the need;
- Undertake specific ecological surveys, some of which can only be done in summer (usually May to August)
- Apply for planning permission/building consent;
- Apply for and preferably secure (in principle if needed) the necessary capital and revenue funding to deliver your proposed services. NB. If the group took on the site, they would be responsible for ALL costs, to prepare, run and maintain the site, and buildings/structures including boundaries, vegetation, all insurances including Professional Indemnity and Public Liability insurances and general insurances for goods and equipment provided. Site establishment and future running costs including rates, security and any other charges that a site owner/occupier may incur.

We confirm that RCT's proposals to develop the plot shop scheme on the above site will be put on hold for a minimum of 12 months to allow you to develop your proposal to the required stage."

7. Collaborative Approach

Rhondda Netball withdrew from the process at an early stage as they realised there was more synergy between Friends of the Mid and the Coalfield Flower Farm. We subsequently met with the CFF on several occasions and they took the lead in applying for the £10,000 community support from Corporate Estates. It became obvious we would need to revise our plans for the Mid Rhondda Field to accommodate the Coalfield Flower Farm and to reduce the demands made upon us by the head of RCT Major Development.

Following further meetings with the Coalfield Flower Farm we informed the RCT Together team that we had decided to submit competitive applications. Our default position had always been that the field remained an open space for the community and we felt this was ultimately incompatible with the commercial nature of the Coalfield Flower Farm's vision.

8. Reducing Demands

By this point the composition of our group had changed. We suffered a heavy blow, personally and as a group, when our secretary passed away on Christmas Day following a brief illness. One of our newer members, an employee of the Morgan Sindall Group, was astonished by the demands placed upon us by RCTCBC. He stated that he regularly handles contracts worth millions but was never asked to provide as stringent a business plan as the one that confronted a small voluntary community group like ours.

We decided to ask our local councillor to try and arrange a meeting with the Council Leader to discuss our concerns. The meeting was arranged via Zoom.

9. Meeting with RCTCBC Council Leader

We met with Andrew Morgan via Zoom and explained our concerns regarding the demands placed upon us. Mr. Morgan appeared genuinely surprised and explained he had been involved in a community group before entering politics. He did not remember ever been confronted with such stringent demands and suggested a site visit might be the most appropriate way forward.

10. Site Visit

The site visit was arranged for Wednesday 23rd November. Cllr. Morgan and Dave Baton, Head of Leisure Services met with our local councillor, and several members of Friends of the Mid, and undertook a tour of the site. Immediately following the tour Mr. Morgan confirmed he would instruct Corporate Services that the ground was being taken out of their control and announced there would be no housing development. The field would remain within council control. Work would begin to clear the perimeter of the field, the old cycle track, and benches would be placed at intervals. He also instructed Mr. Baton to do what was necessary to bring the field back to a suitable surface for community use. This was an unexpected and very

welcome development. It was also suggested that Friends of the Mid should remain involved and engaged with any future developments.

11. Ongoing Concerns

While delighted with the outcome the site still remains in Council control with no guarantee that in the future, perhaps under a change of leadership, there will not be a change of attitude and we find ourselves back to square one. We approached the charity 'Fields in Trust' whose stated aim is to facilitate a *"legal agreement between Fields in Trust and a space's landowner that they will retain it for use as a green space, usually a public park, playing field or recreation ground, in perpetuity."* To that end we contacted RCTCBC but were told, *" In the immediate future the council will not be pursuing the Fields in Trust designation. With the site now being taken back under Leisure and Parks we feel this protects the land for the wider community to enjoy. Leisure and Parks will continue to work with Friends of the Mid as the land is bought back to use for the benefit of the community."*

11.1 In the course of our campaign we spoke to community groups who faced similar issues. So much of our heritage, community assets, and green spaces have already been lost. Friends of the Mid have begun working with local schools to raise awareness of our rich and unique cultural heritage before it is too late. Just down the road the old Glamorgan Colliery Power House, described by someone as 'Rhondda's castle', and central to the Tonypanddy Riots of 1910, has been sold to a private buyer. Supporter Karl-James Langford, touches the heart of the matter when he says, *"Our heritage is key to our identity, wherever you were born, within these borders our land breathes the diverse nature of its people."* Once we forget where we came from we forget who we truly are. There are passionate committed people, like Friends of the Mid, desperate to support and enrich their local communities who are left feeling powerless and disenfranchised. We may not have achieved our objective in preserving the Mid Rhondda Filed in perpetuity but at least we have succeeded in securing it a stay of execution.