

COMMENT BY FURNESS RUFC ON THE PROPOSED MODIFICATION TO THE NEW LOCAL PLAN FOR BARROW-IN-FURNESS BY THE DELETION OF SITE REC54 (MODIFICATION REFERENCE MAM27)

The change proposed by the Inspector is to delete site REC54 (the Site) and associated information from Table 7. The reason given is that 'there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate a surplus of pitches.' Furness RUFC (The Club) puts forward the following points in support of its assertion that the Site and associated information should remain in Table 7:

1. The Club appears to be caught in the crossfire between Sport England (SE) and Barrow Borough Council (BBC). On the one hand SE argues that BBC doesn't have a Playing Field Strategy while on the other hand BBC argues that it does, and that it's called a Sport and Recreational Facilities Assessment. SE says this document wasn't available at Publication Stage nor was it consulted on it. It is grossly unfair that the Club should effectively be penalised because a statutory body and a local authority can't agree on the fundamental point of whether there would be sufficient playing fields in Barrow in the event that the Site was given a development allocation. It's entirely feasible that Sport England might agree that the Site could be granted a development allocation once it is in possession of all relevant information. As things stand SE says that it isn't whilst BBC appears to take the view that it is!. Surely the only fair way to deal with the current impasse between SE and BBC would be to reinstate the Site in Table 7 on the understanding that even with a development allocation the Site would still have to surmount the planning hurdle, and that SE could object to any planning application using the 'not surplus to requirements' argument at that stage if it deemed it appropriate to do so.. It should also be noted that BBC did not object to the inclusion of the Site on any basis, let alone 'insufficient evidence to demonstrate a surplus of pitches', the inference being that BBC accepts that there are sufficient pitches.
2. On the question of the need for playing fields in Barrow, it is the Club's case that BBC never objected to the Site's inclusion because the need doesn't currently exist; it will not exist in the future; and indeed hasn't existed for many years. One only has to consider the number of playing fields within Barrow's boundaries that are no longer used. The following list is a long one and is not intended to be comprehensive but includes:
 - (a) The former Risedale School fields
 - (b) The former Park View School fields
 - (c) The former Thorncliffe School fields
 - (d) The Thorncliffe fields under the aegis of the Barrow Playing Field Users Association
 - (e) Fields at Earnse Bay
 - (f) The field at Park Vale running track on Walney
 - (g) Fields at the rear of the former Victoria School

The common theme here is that all these playing fields are, or were, publicly owned but were used by the community as well as by the schools of which they formed part. Neither the schools nor the wider community has any further use for

them which is why those that haven't been disposed of go to seed, literally and metaphorically. This non comprehensive list must take in at least 25 playing fields that are no longer in use and includes a prime example of public money gone rapidly to waste in the shape of the now redundant all weather and expensively floodlit tennis courts at the former Thorncliffe School site.

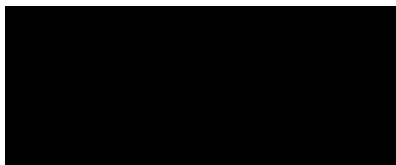
3. Mention has been made of the use of the Site by Furness Rovers Football Club and this has indeed been the case for a number of years. That use has been by virtue of a Licence Agreement but has dwindled over the years due to a combination of fewer people playing football and the drainage problems affecting the Site – problems which, if either the Club or Furness Rovers had the wherewithal, could easily be remedied but to what effect? Pitches that drain well but have no one to play on them! In any event the argument that by disposing of the Site the Club would be depriving Furness Rovers and others of a venue has been undermined firstly by the point put forward as to the loss of playing fields in Barrow in numbered paragraph 2 above and secondly by Furness Rovers serving notice to quit on the Club on 1 October, effective immediately, having made alternative arrangements at another previously underused facility, the former Croft Park playing fields at the rear of Abbey Road in Barrow. Apparently the negotiations had been ongoing for several months but understandably the Football Club had not made the Club privy to them. The matter was discussed at the Club's committee meeting on 1 October when it was decided to cut the fields comprising the Site once more this year and then leave them fallow. Perhaps the longer grass might discourage the ever present menace of the local dog walkers who treat the Site as their own.
4. The points made in the preceding three paragraphs are what the Club will call planning points and the appropriate weight should be given to them. There are however other reasons why SE should withdraw its objection and why the Site should be given a development allocation. These reasons are as follows:
 - (a) Across the board, what are viewed as the traditional team sports, ie football, rugby (both codes) and cricket are dying a slow death in Barrow. One only has to speak to those involved and to a man they bemoan what is happening to team sports in the town. The reasons are myriad but include in no particular order, shift work at BAE (the main employer), stag weekends in Europe, wall to wall sport on TV, the Internet, relaxed liquor licensing laws and the popularity of other sports that didn't exist when football, rugby and cricket were the only sports on the agenda. Rugby Union has perhaps suffered more than others. Its demise began with the demise of the town's Grammar School which turned out large numbers of players who, when they left school, made the short journey up the road to Furness RUFC. As a result the Club thrived, so much so that in the 1960's it regularly turned out 5 senior teams every week along with a Colts (Under 19's) side. The Club's then trustees had seen this coming, and in anticipation acquired, at the Club membership's expense, the land which now comprises the Site. The Site was formerly farmland but through the hard work of the membership was transformed into two full sized

rugby pitches. Unfortunately this upturn in the Club's fortunes did not continue and with the demise of the Grammar School in the late 1970's the slow decline began. The Club has fought what in military terms would be called a valiant rearguard action, but despite its best efforts now finds itself well down rugby unions' league structure and fighting a constant battle to turn out teams. Until three years ago the Club just about managed to turn out two teams a week. The first team would play most weekends between September and April, the second team less so. Matters came to a head when after fulfilling six consecutive fixtures in the north and west of Cumbria, not one of the opposition teams reciprocated. Without regular fixtures players drift elsewhere and find other things to do. This effectively killed the second team stone dead and since then it has ceased to exist, meaning that for the last three years the Club has turned out one team only. Even if by some miracle the second team could be resurrected the league system is structured in such a way that if the first team is playing at home the second team will be playing away. The point is, the Club does not, and will not, need three playing fields. It only needs one playing field. The two fields comprising the Site will never be used for rugby or any other team based sport again in the Club's considered opinion and in all probability will be let for grazing. They are surplus to the Club's requirements and surplus to other sports' requirements which is why they were put forward for a development allocation. The Club is not a statutory body or local authority with access to public funds. It is a private organisation, albeit with a strong sense of community, which is now being penalised for the foresight of its trustees in acquiring the Site all those years ago. To effectively deprive the Club of an asset that it has developed and nurtured over many years is surely against the laws of natural justice. It seems to be very much a case of 'Thanks very much for buying the land, thanks for tending it for the last 50 years, oh and by the way when you've no longer any use for it we won't let you dispose of it, we'll let someone else use it instead, because they didn't do what you did and make their own arrangements before or at the time they established their club and relied on public funds (which have now dried up) to provide them with a facility.'

- (b) The Club is well served by a willing band of volunteers, albeit a band that is reducing in number as each year goes by. The clubhouse and grounds, despite the unstinting efforts of said volunteers, can best be described as tired. A leak is mended, another appears and so on. The Club's meagre resources are constantly stretched. So, it was with an eye to the future of rugby union in the town of Barrow that the Club saw the New Local Plan as perhaps an opportunity to gain some well needed funds; not to disperse to the members, but to use to build a new clubhouse with modern facilities, attractive enough to make people think that perhaps rugby union is a sport that's going places and want to be part of that. A modern clubhouse with a revamped first team pitch and an all weather training facility that will attract a following and

generate funds to enable the Club to firstly consolidate but then hopefully expand – to once more have the resources to fund a second team, and maybe a third team and who knows, maybe even resurrect its junior section. The alternative, the Club fears, is that the money will run out, the supply of players will dry up and instead of two surplus playing fields there will be three and one very tired clubhouse, fit only to be knocked down. To summarise therefore, the proposal to delete the Site from the Local Plan will be to the detriment of sport in Barrow not the benefit. Furness Rovers have made other arrangements, no one else will replace them; the Club has no use for the Site and the combined effect of all these things will be to bring about the Club's demise, which is the complete antithesis of what SE are supposed to stand for. Surely it is within the wit of man for SE and BBC to get their heads together and decide whether or not the Site is, as the Club argues, and as BBC appears to implicitly accept, surplus to sporting requirements. The Club is reluctant to say it but from its point of view the proposed deletion of the Site looks very much like the least troublesome way out.

4 October 2018



By way of a postscript:

My sporting antecedents



Barrow Grammar School – Football, Rugby and Athletics

Lancashire County Schools Football U 18s

North of England triallist U18s rugby union

Liverpool University 1st XV rugby union and 1st XIII rugby league

Open age football, rugby union and rugby league

I am well acquainted with amateur sport in Barrow-in-Furness and at the   continue to maintain a strong interest. It would be easy to walk away and find something else to do. It saddens me to see the way it is heading despite the best efforts of many committed local people, but unfortunately the decline seems to be inexorable. The Club's proposal is a genuine attempt to halt, or at least slow down, that decline. Any windfall profit from a disposal will be ploughed straight back into rugby union for the benefit of the Club and the Barrow public.

