

NOTES FOR THE PLANNING INSPECTOR - LAND AT HUMBER DOUCY LANE, IPSWICH

Rugby pitches and the adjacent training areas.

Mike Hancock, Chairman, Ipswich Rugby Football Club. February 2025

1. A brief Introduction to the club and myself.

Ipswich RFC can trace its history back to 1872 and is the 4th oldest "open" rugby club in the world. "Open" in that it is open to all rather than say, Cambridge University or St Barts Hospital which were created solely for their students and staff.

Ipswich RFC moved to their current site at Humber Doucy Lane shortly after the 2nd World War adding an additional 2 acres of land bordering the driveway approximately 40 years ago from The Tollemache brewing concern.

Pressure to meet the demand for youth and mini rugby led to negotiations with adjacent landowners at the time, the Jolly family (I think also referred to as the Kesgrave Covenant), that resulted in permission for the agricultural land behind our clubhouse and fronting Humber Doucy Lane to be used for additional pitches and training areas in 1992. This activity, mainly (but certainly not restricted to, for many years), relates to youth and mini rugby (essentially, 6 year olds through to 18 year olds). This land has been in continuous use since 1994 when the new pitches and training areas were deemed fit for purpose, save for the COVID restricted periods.

I joined the club in 1978 and have fulfilled roles as diverse as player, youth and senior rugby coach, referee, Director of Rugby & Chairman whilst being fully immersed in other areas on many occasions (fundraising, social event planning, ground and clubhouse maintenance and repair, sponsorship, bar and kitchen duties, festival planning etc). I estimate that I have been actively involved in Ipswich RFC for at 36 of the last 47 years with periods of youth coaching in the 80's, 90's and in the 2010 decade. I therefore believe I am qualified to speak on behalf of the club with an almost unique perspective as not many members are as long serving as myself.

Since 2010 I have been continuously involved at the club either as coach to youth teams (Under 13-Under 18) and senior men's teams. I was elected Chairman of Ipswich Rugby Club in 2017.

Ipswich RFC has a good track record of working within the Ipswich and wider community to meet the demands made upon it to provide rugby for all. The success of the England Rugby team in winning the 2003 Rugby World Cup resulted in a surge of interest in that, and subsequent years, as youngsters wanted to be "the next Johnny Wilkinson".

More recently, the national women's team The Red Roses, has created huge interest in women's and girls' rugby. This has culminated in an increase in membership for this section of the club which has great potential to grow further.

The club has recovered well from the period of forced inactivity during the Covid pandemic.

The lack of provision in local state and primary schools to offer rugby as a curricula or ex curricula sport has put more onus on clubs to provide for this interest. Ipswich RFC is trying to meet this demand. We do not turn new players away but are close to playing limits at certain age groups.

For your interest, recent England international Lewis Ludlam and current Vice Captain of The Great Britain 7's rugby squad, Tom Emery, both came through Ipswich RFC ranks as mini and youth rugby players.

Of greater relevance is the value to the community in trying to instil the English RFU's core values of Sportsmanship, Discipline, Respect, Enjoyment & Teamwork through to youngsters when they learn the game at Ipswich RFC. This is only possible through the efforts of countless volunteers who dedicate thousands of hours every season to the community game at Ipswich RFC.

The following table shows the current membership (Feb 2025) of Ipswich RFC

	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25
Total Membership	452	550	657	580
Senior Players	74	68	70	73
Minis & Youth (U18's)	178	238	310	347

The growth in U18's membership (boys and girls) over 4 years is exceptional.

2. Facilities – Ipswich RFC's current position.

We currently use of 5 grass pitches. 2 of which are fully floodlit. There are also training areas shared by youth and junior squads (no lighting).

We have a clubhouse, carpark and some storage facilities.

The club house is aged, with constant calls for upgrade and maintenance. The car park is limited in its capacity for big "match days" and youth festivals/events, often requiring use of playing/training areas for overspill (circa 20 times per annum).

The appeal site has the following: -

One full size pitch suitable for senior rugby matches and senior youth games (U16 & U18) and one smaller pitch best suited for matches for U13, U14 & U15 games.

The pitches may also be split on match days to accommodate U10, U11 and U12 matches.

It contains a sizeable area for training and match grids for our "mini rugby" section use and for hosting visiting teams on match days, specifically the under 6 & 7's, under 8's and under 9's. (mini rugby is a generic term used to describe rugby at U6 – U12 ages).

Note - Girls play in the mini section but then follow a different age grouping structure. U12, U14, U16 & U18's who occasionally use this area.

3. USAGE OF THE APPEAL SITE PLAYING AREAS

How often do we use the appeal site pitches?

During September to the end of April the area is generally used as follows.

Saturday afternoons from 1 – 4pm

Sunday mornings from approximately 0900 – 1300

Sunday afternoon matches on occasion, this is maybe 3-5 times a season and dependant on the condition of other pitches.

May – there is often some activity in the early part of May on the pitches in question but generally we aim to let the grass recover and put the club in “sleep mode” for May.

June & July – part of this area is used for social touch rugby from 6pm – 8.15pm on a Wednesday evening.

July & August - Tuesday & Thursday evenings 6-9 pm from July 1st - This area is used for some youth training and for pre-season men's and women's conditioning/coaching.

School holidays – 3 times a year the pitches may be used for training camps for rugby run by Northampton Saints. These can be 2-, 3- or 4-day camps at Easter, Summer and October ½ term from 10am-4pm. These camps vary in popularity, but they do not run with less than 30 participants and can have as many as 80 children attending daily.

Note – the soil at our club is heavy clay and compacts with heavy use. Late spring is the best time to treat the 2 main pitches (those with floodlights) and this involves deep tining (drilling), aeration, fertilizing, sanding, scarifying, seeding etc. The contractor wants us to limit use of these pitches to zero if possible so these pitches can recover and are in the best condition to take the load of thousands of weekly footprints during the main season. That is one of the reasons why, during the off season, we will use the pitches in the appeal site.

Note – when matches are played on the appeal site the preparation time for marking out the pitch for use can be 2 hours per pitch. This must be done mid-week, so everything is ready in time.

4. The Numbers Involved.

This will vary week on week, month to month. I do request your patience whilst I try my best to outline how the playing and training areas within the appeal site are used as it not a simple repeatable timetable. There are variations of use from "we can barely cope" to that's "a quiet week" at Ipswich Rugby Club with factors such as fixture scheduling, the weather, pitch conditions, holidays etc. influencing numbers of people using the area and when.

Sundays – September to April

Ipswich RFC follows English Rugby Football Union guidelines with regards to the proportion of training sessions to permissible matches. This ratio is based on 3 training sessions to one match. The emphasis is on safe skill and technique development ahead of just playing matches every week.

So, approximately 3 out of every 4 weeks, starting September, are dedicated to training at the club.

Usually the minis (Under 6's to Under U12's) work as a block so fixtures are organised as a group fixture. The U13, U14's, U15@s & U16's and U17/U18's arrange their fixtures according to availability of opposition, cup competition requirements etc.

When everyone *is just training* at Ipswich RFC on a Sunday the appeal site will have approximately 150 children on it with staggered times from 0900 through to 1pm.

The club must skilfully manage the programme of matches that it can accommodate on a Sunday. Apart from playing pitches/grids it must factor in changing room space, catering, medical provision and car parking.

The Minis (U6/7's through to Under 12's) playing matches at home - These often involve 2 guest clubs, so a round robin fixture of 3 teams will play against each other (this is long established practise). When this happens (approximately 5 times from September to April inclusive) – there may be 300 + youngsters of this age group using this space. Note – this is the only space we can use - the other pitches will have been trained on during the week and will not be available for use or are being used by other older age groups for training or matches.

When the mini section is being hosted away then this appeal site area is used for U13-18 matches quite regularly. These games start from 1030 or as late as 1pm depending on schedule. Circa 40 – 80 children will be involved in this scenario.

Ipswich Mini Rugby Festival – this has been running annually for approximately 28 years. It now attracts about 800 children aged 6-12. It is usual to run this on the first Sunday after Easter and is a full day of matches. It is one of the most established and best run festivals in the East of England staged from 0930 – 1500. Every piece of available grass is used to make this annual event a success.

Occasional Festivals – Ipswich have in recent years hosted the Eastern Counties girl's rugby festival on a Sunday (2024) featuring teams from all over Eastern Counties. This was a whole day festival from 0900 – 1600 featuring more than 300 girls. Other boy's festivals have been hosted by Ipswich RFC. We have hosted at least 6 youth 7 - aside festivals over the last 12 years. These were run on Saturdays (boys) and Sundays (girls) with over 200 participants each day. The pitches on the appeal site were used both days.

Saturdays

Senior men's matches frequently take place on the larger of the 2 pitches in the appeal site. Kick off times are typically 2pm to allow for the light fading. 2 team squads with coaches, medics, supporters etc and the ref equals between 40 – 70 people in this area. I have coached Ipswich senior teams and refereed games on Saturday afternoons on this pitch.

Summer Touch Rugby – June/July – this can attract more than 100 players. Mixed gender from aged 16 onwards.

Pre-season training in July & August – upwards of 60 players 2 -3 times weekly.

5. **A COMMENT ON MUGA & OFF-SITE PROVISION** – we note the argument that provision of an enlarged MUGA somehow counters the loss of the appeal site. The phrase comparing "apples to apples" springs to mind. MUGA (multi use games area) is designed for football, tennis, basketball, non-contact rugby and netball). Hopefully the timings and numbers involved, highlighted above, demonstrate that this is quite nonsensical both in terms of the space that rugby training and the staging of matches (much of it involving contact) requires.

Note -- the club has and will continue will use suitable off-site facilities to ease pressure on our grounds. This is usually for midweek training where floodlighting is generally required. We have in the recent past used Ipswich Schools facilities at Henley Road, an indoor horse arena in Henley, indoor and outdoor facilities at St. Josephs College and we are currently looking to use a new facility at Westbourne School, Ipswich for a couple of our age groups. This nibbles away at our problem to accommodate the demand on our pitches but does not impact significantly on the pitches in question. It is not a popular option with coaches and players.

The club's letter to the council in February 2020 (replicated below) clearly highlights the need for additional space to accommodate the demand. The situation has not changed other than saying our need is probably even greater in the light of demand from our girls and women's sections which may increase later this year as England host the 2025 Women's World Cup.

Meetings with IBC planning officers to discuss possible alternative sites for possible relocation have not identified any firm proposals.

6. A note regarding Women's & Girls Rugby

Ipswich RFC has invested in coach provision, training, medical provision and facilities for our women's and girls' sections as best we can. Girls, who have come through our ranks have been scouted for national league clubs and our women's side gained promotion last season. The membership has grown in the last 4 years, and it is projected to grow further. The women generally play matches on Sunday afternoons. We will look to play these on our main pitch but there have been occasions to switch this to the larger pitch on the appeal site.

7. Meetings with developers – the new owners of the site met with me and 2 colleagues in November 2023 to discuss possible relocation of Ipswich RFC.

Amongst points raised was trying to see if the rugby club could be incorporated into a scheme that would fill the gap between their appeal sites and to discuss whether an alternative site might be suitable for relocation of Ipswich RFC.

A formal written offer did not materialise from that meeting.

The club were asked to estimate the cost of a move to a site identified locally that was of sufficient size to meet its requirements. With assistance from the facilities team at the English RFU regarding pitch and floodlighting costs, and disclosure of build and associated costs for the new facility at Wymondham Rugby Club (about 40 miles away and built around 2020) Ipswich RFC arrived at an estimated total cost to relocate to the proposed site. This figure was more than twice that of the verbal offer (subject to planning etc) from the developers.

Wymondham Rugby Club is a similar size to Ipswich RFC and their facilities are in line with our minimum requirements for relocation. Ipswich RFC's position with regards to a move to the proposed site is that we cannot, even if we may wish to, as the financial bridge is insurmountable.

At the time of writing Ipswich RFC has no debt but nor does it have more than "rainy day" reserves (our boiler is close to packing up!). The subscriptions from our minis and youth sections and their importance in attracting sponsorship/kitchen/fundraising and bar revenue is essential for the continued existence of any community rugby club like ours.

(I am aware that there has been a negotiation between the previous landowner and the club which stretches back to 2013 and possibly long before. I was not involved in these although I did have conversations with the Kesgrave Covenant's land agent Mr Sparkes prior to the land sale to the developers).

A subsequent meeting in the autumn of 2024 with the developers has not yet moved discussions forward. I was asked to revisit the relocation costs, which I did, and these were presented to the developers by email. This confirmed Ipswich RFC's previous position that we were not in a financial position to proceed to a move, however desirable that might be, at this stage.

Summary

Ipswich RFC rely on the submission from Sport England and submit this document to support their views. Additionally, we would like to offer the following comments.

Can we continue our activities without the appeal site? No, we would lose the ability to offer rugby for a large section of our membership and this would be severely detrimental to serving the needs of the Ipswich rugby community which extends beyond players and parents.

Can that be solved by improved by additional or improved floodlighting and drainage? No, that may help solve a part of the problem but not without additional investment in 3G pitches, upgrading of existing floodlighting and further floodlighting, all of which are prohibitively expensive and not necessarily a desired facility.

Mike Hancock

Chair

Ipswich RFC

February 2025

Copy of email from February 2020.

From: Mike Hancock <[REDACTED]>
Sent: 26 February 2020 11:31
To: Michael Hammond <[REDACTED]>
Cc: PlanningPolicy <PlanningPolicy@ipswich.gov.uk>
Subject: Re: Ipswich RFC - Land At Humber Doucy Lane, Ipswich IP4 3PZ

Dear Sir

PROPOSED LOCAL PLAN SITE ALLOCATION

1P184b - Land at Ipswich RFC HUMBER DOUCY LANE IP43PZ

In light of the recent notice regarding land allocation adjacent to Ipswich RFC, Humber Doucy Lane IP43PZ

I would like formally register comments of behalf of Ipswich Rugby Football Club and to request a meeting to discuss 2 specific points.

1 The absence of land 1P184b in any allocation. This land is a driveway and a grassed playing area for youth and junior rugby. It also serves as overspill car parking on busy senior match days. It is not large enough for a full size pitch and is therefore only generally used by Under 11 & Under 12 years age groups).

2 Replacement facilities for any loss of land currently used for playing and training by Ipswich RFC that abuts IP184b (part of land identified as ISPA4.1 in your most recent PROPOSED LOCAL PLAN SITE ALLOCATION

Please note that Ipswich RFC is now in its 150th year. It continues to serve the local rugby playing community including making provision for a growing interest in girls and women's rugby. It runs rugby for 11 age groups from under 6 through to under 18's. It runs 3 men's senior teams, a women's team and 2 fledgling girls age group teams. All sections of our club are growing.

The club already has a requirement for extra land to meet the demands being made upon it.

We currently lease land adjacent to IP184b to meet demand (as well as hiring an all weather floodlit facility nearby on a weekday evening as we do not have sufficient floodlit space at Humber Doucy Lane).

Ipswich RFC requires at least one more full size rugby pitch and an all weather floodlit facility plus 100-150 more hard standing car parking spaces to better meet the demands being made upon it.

Our clubhouse facilities are not at the required standard. We require additional changing room facilities and well as improved gender separation for changing rooms and disabled toilets.

In short we are bursting at the seams and struggling to meet the demands made upon us by the local rugby community due to the successful endeavours of dozens of volunteers.

We do not wish to be omitted from any land allocation with the view that any subsequent funds realised by land sale could greatly assist the club in better meeting the demands currently being placed on it. Moreover we are seeking to expand our offering to the local rugby community should larger replacement playing facilities adjacent to our current pitches be made available or a new site identified.

We recognise that the majority of our land ownership falls within East Suffolk Council but we primarily serve the needs of Ipswich Borough Council residents.

We have had plans drawn up for a new clubhouse under guidance from the Rugby Football Union. We are also looking at a separate project with a phased extension/refurbishment of the existing clubhouse. However we seem to be in a permanent CATCH 22 situation of not knowing what may happen with land allocation for planning and find it difficult to make progress with any development plans.

Your acknowledgement of receipt of this e-mail would be welcome ahead of the consultation period end (1145 March 2nd 2020).

I would be obliged if a meeting could be arranged to discuss the contents of this letter and any broader issues that could help enhance Ipswich RFC's offering to the local community.

With kind regards

Mike Hancock
Chairman
Ipswich RFC