Objection to the proposed development of Tooting Triangle.

We moved here to Balham from North London in 1999. Originally to a flat at the bottom of Criffel Avenue and then to our current home, a house in Scholars Road.
The entrance to Scholars Road is almost directly opposite what is the entrance to the site that is the subject of this enquiry, what we call locally 'The Triangle'.
One of the main reasons we chose to settle here in South London was the possibility of having an unfenced common on our doorstep. In Islington, our local park, like all the London parks we grew up with, was a no-go area after 6pm, fenced off and locked up all night.
For the last 23 years our lives have been completely intertwined with Tooting Bec Common. It is a place we can safely walk alone. It is a place where we walk with friends. We walk across it to visit people on the other side. We arrange to meet friends there or bump into people we know by chance. We jog and exercise there, and we relax there. I couldn't count the number of birthdays and social events we have celebrated on the common. It's the heart and lungs of our London lives.
Living so close to The Triangle, we were very lucky to benefit from the drop-in One O'clock club where we made our first local friends when we moved here with our baby boy. I remember the original playground too, though not so fondly - the metal Tractor climbing frame! How dilapidated and out of date the whole site was, it was all a bit sad. In fact, the drop in centre's separate playground there was the safest and best bit about that corner of the common.
Somewhere along the way two new high-end bark chip and rope park style playgrounds were installed on the common. One over by Chestnut Avenue and the other at The Triangle. The playground at The Triangle was also given a huge sandpit play-area.

I remember hearing at the time that money for these playgrounds was one of the last budgeted spends (£225 million) signed off by the outgoing Labour government. Ed Ball's legacy so to speak.
I googled it just now, to see if this was true and quickly found this press article from the time (https://www.politics.co.uk/news/2008/02/29/government-funding-for-new-adventure-playgrounds/)

I have cut and pasted some of it below because I believe that Mr Balls' words are just as relevant now as they were then, especially regarding how the hard surfaced area is currently used by children and by extension, the entire community:

"As parents we all know that having the time, space and opportunity to play freely and safely is one of the defining characteristics of a good childhood," he said.

Mr Balls continued: "Children need places which allow them to meet their friends and have fun – being able to burn off their energy in unstructured play is an important part of maintaining a healthy weight and life.

"That is why we're making such a big commitment to invest in outdoor play facilities for children."

Sixty-five local authorities have been invited to bid to take part in the first round of funding allocation, of which 15 will be selected for £2 million capital funding as well as "significant funding".

Other local authorities can also qualify for around £1 million in capital funding if they submit satisfactory bids.

All applications must include plans for new, staff playgrounds with indoor and outdoor facilities aimed at 8 to 13-year-olds.

The government wants an additional 3,500 children to have access to outside play spaces by 2011.

This text has helped me think again about some of the basic flaws inherent in the proposal you are being asked to consider.

The site at the corner of The Triangle field consists of three parts. A large hard surface area, a building (housing the Boxing Club and One O'clock club) and The Triangle playground.

Money came in thanks to the government grant to update the playground. Money from this government playground grant was not spent on the building or the hard surface area, all of which were then and are now, the responsibility of the council to maintain, keep up to date and make useful to the local community.

The building has, over the last ten years or so, been left to fall into disrepair. This building and the playground regularly, after prolonged periods of rainfall, fall victim to quite severe floods. Whoever decided to build on that corner of the common, (it's at the bottom of a hill where long covered streams used to run into the Hydeburn Brook under Cavendish Road), would have served us well had they decided to build the structure at least a metre off the ground. I see no such 'elevated' plans for the current proposed re-build….

This excess water is runoff from all the common itself, coming from the Triangle Field and from the common on the other side of the railway. A huge amount of water with nowhere but The Triangle to flow into, until it then hits the drains at Cavendish Road across the way from us on Scholars Road. All the grass on the common nearby quickly turns into a muddy bog. The streams and drains that exist in that corner are either poorly designed in the first place, poorly maintained or have just become overwhelmed by large rainfall events.

The hard surface adjacent to the Triangle field also floods, though to a much lesser extent. So it becomes the only useable part of the common in the area often for months at a time.

Even when water starts to take over the hard surface, it remains a much-used space for many local people. As the water is rarely more than a big puddle and it drains quickly. Though not ideal, it is still useable. It's either play here – or in the mud – or not at all.

It's obvious that a plan is needed to either update or remove the buildings on the site. What is not obvious is why our hard surface needs to be part of this building plan at all.

The only reason – one that the council like a dog with a bone, will never give up on - is so that it can be packaged up with the building, leased to a developer/for profit company in order to turn the whole site into a going business concern. Absolving the council of any further financial responsibility for the development or upkeep of the buildings on the site.

That business would be a fenced off sports centre – and a football takeover.

I am not against the Boxing/One O'clock club being developed. I'm not against football.

Public toilets, a stay and play space, a café, changing rooms, a community space, a boxing club, a gym even. All would be fine things for the site. They all sound good. The problem here, is that it seems as though Richmond and Wandsworth council won't spend a penny of their community charge payers' money for facilities that are on the tip of a finger of land on the border of the borough. The Triangle is a border crossing where hardly any users of the current facilities come from Richmond and Wandsworth. Most of the local community, such as the residents of Scholars Road, are from the neighbouring borough of Lambeth. Which surrounds and borders The Triangle field.

There has been no real consultation with our local community about this proposal. I think this must be partly since local users largely go there from neighbouring Lambeth. Which was made publicly clear at the planning meeting; there was no need to consult us, exactly because we are in a different borough. The fact that nobody in the geographical local community seemed to know anything about this development proposal until just a few weeks before the planning committee decision meeting, speaks to that secrecy. A grass roots petition resulted in many thousands of signatures and written objections all of which were rubbished and completely ignored at the planning meeting. The petition was the first time I came to know of the football centre proposal re surfacing.

The council has been fixated with the idea of turning The Triangle into a private football business for a very long time. In 2008 a similar albeit much larger scheme (12 five-a-side floodlit pitches) was proposed. On that occasion they wanted to take over a more of the grass on the common, including adding car parking and taking away a large slice of the Triangle field itself.

It met with a huge amount of local opposition. Including a strong objection from Lambeth Council (see below) plus thousands of concerned local residents, including one Government Minister Steve Norris MP (who lived in Telford Ward at the time).

https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/protect-tooting-common.html

https://moderngov.lambeth.gov.uk/Published/C00000142/M00005755/$$ADocPackPublic.pdf

Motion 11, page 113. Council notes the intention of LB Wandsworth to construct up to 12 five-a-side fenced and floodlit hard-surface football pitches on the Triangle Field, an area of Tooting Bec Common on the edge of Wandsworth used mainly by Lambeth residents in Streatham Hill, St Leonard's and Thornton wards.

Council opposes these plans and will take vigorous steps to campaign against the proposed development.

Council instructs the Chief Executive to ask his opposite number at Wandsworth to drop this plan which would cause grave damage to the natural environment of the common and loss of metropolitan open land.

To note that local Thornton ward councillors have already expressed their opposition to aspects of these proposals.

In addition to the concerns raised above we are also mindful of the traffic implications of such a scheme. This would be particularly disappointing given that this administration has produced excellent plans for safety and landscape improvements on Cavendish Road.

Wandsworth finally abandoned the plans in 2010 in the face of a series of overwhelmingly strong local protests.

Tenaciously they have now scaled down their plans so that only the existing hard surface is affected and have lost the car parking completely.

And here we are again 14 years later! Thank you for having this enquiry.

I'd like you to think mainly about the hard surface, which is at the heart of the business plan for the redevelopment of the building and the 25-year lease of the whole site.

"Children need places which allow them to meet their friends and have fun – being able to burn off their energy in unstructured play is an important part of maintaining a healthy weight and life."

Mr Balls hit the nail on the head!

The updated playground developed with grant money from central government, is a great place for smaller children. But those small children grow into bigger children, and only too quickly outgrow the ropes and swings. They really need to run around and burn off all that energy.

Where do they do that? Outside on the playground, next door on the common! The Hard surface that is the bridge between the children's play area and the rest of the world outside. It's a safe space. Not a road in sight. It is an open space, a place where younger children can learn to stray from their carers and gain confidence without that adult worrying about the whereabouts of the child. The space is like an urban beach without the sea.

Parents will often take their pre-school toddlers on there during the same trip to the playground.

For many kids the hard standing will be their first real expanse of open space beyond the sandpit. It's a spot where they will learn simply by watching older children (and us big kids) at play. It's a place where young people can play together in a structured way of their own invention.

It’s also the best place (really) to learn to ride and control a bike!

Where else can kids do this in an urban environment? On the road? In the supermarket car park on a Sunday evening maybe?

I don't have any photographs, but I'll never forget an occasion watching a man (dressed in traditional Afghan clothing) who was there watching three kids, all probably under the age of ten. They all had bikes, one had stabilisers. I made up a story in my head that this was a family who possibly didn't have access to any outside space except this one. That they certainly couldn't beat it. He felt safe there with them. The kids were all having a brilliant time together, on bikes.

The hard surface is a place where kids can also play with their parents. Or is that vice versa?

The fantastic thing about Tooting Bec Common is that we have the hard surface at The Triangle. That it even exists! It saved us all from going mad during the Lock Down. I think we only really came to appreciate what we had thanks to Lock Down and thanks to Richmond and Wandsworth council trying to take it away from us again.

It is one of those places where kids can play and do whatever they want. Essentially it is a huge public playground.

But unlike a school playground, it is open to the public 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It's that outside the school gates kind of place for parents too – but there are no school gates! We can all come and go.

Whenever we like. No matter what the weather.

It is large enough to accommodate lots of different individuals and groups of users concurrently.

Apart from our horror at the proposed takeover, I doubt that there's ever been any dispute over its use, it's very much a rock up and find a place to play or do your thing.

It's an unusually large piece of dry land in what is for several months of the year, a complete mud bath everywhere else. People can walk on and off the grass (or mud in the winter) as there is no fence on three sides. The fourth being partly a high fence that protects the little ones in the sandpit on the other side and partly the fence of the abandoned One O'clock club.

When the pitch was first built it did not have a fence all the way around it as Mr Cooper Grundy WRONGLY states. Here is a section of a charming short film about Tooting Common from 1978 (44 years ago) https://youtu.be/9SICN86pxQA?t=436 Where there is clearly no fence around either the playground area or the hard standing. At a certain point we can clearly see young people walking freely from the grass onto the hard standing.

There was a period – I don't know how long it was exactly except that it had to be sometime between 1978 and 2000 – when there was some fencing around the hard standing, but not more than 20 years. When I moved to the area in 1999, I remember some last vestiges of fence, behind the southern goal post. It had been heavily vandalised and was removed. It didn't last long.

Here below, in living memory - top from about 2000, middle about 2001.

The bottom image is a line up with 2021. Look how the bushes have become trees. And no fence!

The idea of the hard standing being fenced off and taken over by a private entity is upsetting. The contract with the council is for a profit-making company to transform this peaceful, quiet corner of the common currently open and free for use by any member of the public, into an elitist, closed off specialist football sports centre. A sports centre where any users will have to be in highly organised groups to get in, and who will have to pay for the pleasure.

"As parents we all know that having the time, space and opportunity to play freely and safely is one of the defining characteristics of a good childhood,"

This proposed football development flies in the face of how the common is currently and has historically been used to date: as a free place to play, a place to play freely, in an unstructured way, structured competitively or just for fun. The hard standing on the common is a place to play and to learn to play safely. A place for ALL the community. As it stands the proposed plan is completely discriminatory, favouring a small male minority, against the majority of the public that the council and councillors are supposed to serve.

And for us common folk, regardless of gender, ethnicity or age, the carrot is that we get paid off with a soft play space, a café and some public toilets in return for giving up the hard standing. Looking at the proposal, I would suspect that those tiny toilets would be quickly overwhelmed, considering how many families use the playground on a good day. I can't see it working somehow. It's a poorly thought-out building plan which seems overwhelmingly weighted towards male footballers.
There has been absolutely no consultation in the local community.
This is a tired old idea hatched by distant faceless people at Wandsworth Town Hall, reissued years after a previous failed attempt. They obviously didn't listen then or want to lose again now.
In recently issued local election pamphlets, certain Richmond and Wandsworth councillors are boasting about how they have saved common land from development (The Bowling green on Clapham Common administered by Lambeth Council.) I hope such hypocrisy does not go unnoticed.
There is absolutely no provision for car parking in the area near The Triangle.
Whenever there is an event at the boxing club, the roads can easily gridlock with people looking for spots
There was never any parking or traffic assessment carried out (that would have just tipped all us locals off earlier). It's often impossible to find parking spots on evenings and at weekends locally.
The idea that people will walk, and cycle thanks to a 'green transport plan' is quite frankly laughable.
The nearest public transport is 15 minutes' walk away. On a dark, rainy cold winter night, I doubt many football mums will let their kids travel home unaided after training.
When my son played for a local team, it was five years of driving him all over the place without much car sharing going on.

I strongly object to this proposed development of common land.

Stephen Elson.
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