

BRANDON STADIUM PLANNING APPEAL

APP/E3715/W/23/332013

**PROOF OF EVIDENCE
JOHN EADY BA (HONS) MSc MA**

QUALITY, INTEGRITY, PROFESSIONALISM

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Qualifications and experience

- 1.1 I am the founder and CEO of Knight, Kavanagh & Page (KKP), a leading UK based national and international consultancy operating from offices in Greater Manchester. KKP offers specialist services in sport, leisure, culture, regeneration and green spaces. Clients include local authorities, national governing bodies of sport, Sport England, independent sports clubs and developers. It has particular expertise in relation to planning for sport and leisure facilities and their protection, development and enhancement.
- 1.2 At KKP, I lead a cross-section of work areas covering various consultancy disciplines, sports and facility types. This includes needs assessments and feasibility studies. Where applicable, we follow Sport England's Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) methodology and/or its Assessing Need and Opportunities Guide (ANOG). I was involved in the teams which helped to develop both methodologies – for PPS overseeing the process that KKP managed and for ANOG as a member of the advisory group for Sport England.
- 1.3 Strict adherence to prescribed methodologies ensures that KKP's work produces consistent, reliable results and planning outcomes. We, thus, determine need, reach our conclusions and make recommendations based upon objective evaluations of supply and demand information uncovered, irrespective of which party commissions the assignment. Report findings are based on evidence gathered via a consistent assessment process; they are not orientated to meet client aspirations.
- 1.4 In addition to delivering and otherwise being the final arbiter of report quality for virtually all KKP's ANOG studies, I also specialise and lead our work in areas of provision for which there is not a prescribed methodology. This includes heading up the team which has just completed England Hockey's National Facilities Strategy and our work, for example, producing national facilities strategies in archery, athletics, badminton, netball and rugby league. I am presently also running assignments assessing the need/demand for a proposed national skateboarding centre in Manchester, for performance training and competition facilities in Wales and for elite performance training and international events for British Canoeing.
- 1.5 Given this, I bring expert knowledge of need, feasibility, viability and planning policy relating to sports facilities. All KKP studies take full account of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and, where relevant, Sport England's planning policy. KKP (and I) have a close working relationship with Sport England; its representatives and planning officers are regularly stakeholders and/or consultees on the projects I lead.

Background to involvement

- 1.6 In 2020, KKP was commissioned to undertake a feasibility study in respect of development proposals at the disused and dilapidated Brandon Stadium (otherwise known as Coventry Stadium). The express purpose of this was to assess whether there was sufficient need in the local area to warrant the creation of a full size 3G pitch at the site.
- 1.7 Following the refusal of planning permission for the development of Brandon Stadium for housing, a proposed new 3G pitch and related ancillary accommodation plus landscaping, KKP was re-commissioned (in 2023) to update the abovementioned study. The updated report (Brandon Stadium: 3G Artificial Grass Pitch Feasibility Study Update – July 2023) and the underlying needs assessment reviewed and updated the 2020 KKP report - and is the one being used to inform this inquiry.

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- 1.8 Later in 2020, KKP was commissioned to undertake a needs assessment/viability appraisal with regard to the future of speedway at the site. The purpose of this study, which was undertaken separately, by different consultants and distinct from the 3G study, was to examine whether there is sufficient need/demand to justify the speedway facility being reinstated (or replaced) or whether it could be considered as surplus to requirements.
- 1.9 This report and the underlying need/demand appraisal was then reviewed and updated in the KKP report (Brandon Stadium: Speedway Viability Appraisal – April 2023). This provides an up-to-date picture, checks and challenges the extent to which the findings of the 2020 report were still relevant and/or to determine whether anything has changed which would/should alter the initial conclusions/recommendations. This is the report being used to inform this inquiry.

Scope of evidence

- 1.10 In this document, I outline why the reasoning for planning refusal with regard to the loss of the speedway provision and the creation of a full size 3G pitch at Brandon Stadium should be contested based on the work undertaken by KKP and other relevant information.
- 1.11 Objections and/or comments which do not relate to the 3G feasibility and/or speedway viability elements of the proposals are not applicable to KKP and are, thus, not covered in this proof of evidence.

Declaration

- 1.12 The evidence which I, John Eady, have prepared and provided for this appeal in this proof of evidence is true and I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.

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PART 2: PROOF OF EVIDENCE

2.1 The reason for refusal, as listed in the Decision Notice, is that:

“The development would result in the loss of a sporting facility that has both local and national significance and although an alternative sporting provision is proposed there is not a clearly identified need for the alternative sporting provision and therefore it is considered that the proposed benefits of the new facility do not clearly outweigh the loss of the stadium. The proposal would therefore be contrary to Policy HS4(C) of the Local Plan (2019), Policy LF1 of the Brandon and Brefford Neighbourhood Development Plan (2019) and Paragraph 99(c) of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021).”

3G pitch

2.2 I consider the statement that *“there is not a clearly identified need for the alternative sporting provision”* (the proposed 3G pitch) to be inaccurate. The need is clearly evidenced in our July 2023 Feasibility Study Update Report which confirms that:

- ◀ There is a current shortfall of 3G pitches within the local area and across Rugby and Coventry as a whole.
- ◀ The teams from several large clubs would access a pitch within the Brandon locality and this level of demand (which is more than 38 teams) is more than sufficient to warrant creation of a 3G pitch.
- ◀ Sky Blues in the Community (SBitC) has, even without making pitch space available to other clubs, sufficient currently unmet 3G pitch demand to wholly utilise (and potentially operate) a 3G pitch in the local area.

2.3 Our report acknowledges that need for 3G provision could be met elsewhere locally. It notes that, to the best of our knowledge, no other site options have been formally identified. As a consequence, any alternative 3G pitch development in the area is likely to be some years away from being initiated and progressed, let alone realised. Over this timeframe (based on football participation trends and club aspirations) the level of need is going to grow and unmet demand for 3G pitch access will increase. It could be argued that the lack of a 3G pitch in this area will inhibit growth of football as, without adequate training provision, teams may be prevented from forming and growing.

2.4 More generally, there is a national need for an increased number of full-sized 3G pitches. The FA's National Football Facilities Strategy (2018-2028) states that 3G pitches are *“an essential part of modern football”* and that the *“impact they make cannot be underestimated”*.

2.5 Directly linked to this assertion, it sets out an aim to: *“Deliver 1,000 (full-sized) 3G AGP equivalents, enhancing the quality of playing experience and supporting a sustainable approach to grass roots provision”*.

2.6 It also sets out the FA's ambition that *“every affiliated club will have access to a 3G pitch for training purposes and, where appropriate, matches also”*.

2.7 The July 2023 Feasibility Study Update Report does not set out to prove or disprove whether, in respect of participation, the proposed 3G pitch will outweigh the loss of the stadium and does not incorporate comment on this. It is, however, worth noting that 3G provision accommodates high levels of participation. In the Rugby Local Football Facility Plan (2018), the Football Foundation states that: *“A full-sized 3G FTP caters for an average of 1,200 participants per week and is suitable for various location types. That means being fully inclusive to all sections of the community, with a particular focus on under-represented groups such as women and girls, people with a disability, BAME communities and people from lower socio-economic groups.”*

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- 2.8 This statement about the levels of use typically made of a full-sized sports lit 3G pitch is confirmed in the Rugby Local Football Facilities Plan (2019).

Speedway

- 2.9 The report produced by **wyg** in 2019 lacks an identified evidence base and based upon its content, would appear to be largely predicated upon desk-based research. It acknowledges that speedway has little or no participation value. It also states that there is not an “*unequivocal case that Brandon Stadium is surplus to requirements*”. However, as is set out in the updated KKP Brandon Stadium: Speedway Viability Appraisal – April 2023 report, even this relatively watered-down statement is not justified. This is because:

- ◀ This conclusion is, at best, ambiguous and is based upon **wyg** ‘sitting on the fence’ as it did not seek to either prove or disprove speedway viability at Brandon.
- ◀ Participation (spectating) in speedway, the number of clubs and the number of venues has been in continuous decline since 2009.
- ◀ Four years have passed since this report was produced. Speedway participation and spectator numbers, exacerbated by Covid-19, have continued to decline over this period.
- ◀ The relative and actual cost of stadium reinstatement/replacement will have risen considerably over this period.
- ◀ The new stadiums referenced in the **wyg** report as evidence that speedway could be viable have not transpired, despite having been ‘in the pipeline’ at the time when that report was being prepared. This further underpins KKP’s assessment, based upon a more recent evaluation of the present position in speedway, that this venue will not be viable for the sport.

- 2.10 Since 2016, eight speedway teams (excluding Coventry Bees) have gone into administration and, to the best of our knowledge, not reappeared in another guise. These include Lakeside Hammers and Rye House Rockets and Coventry Bees (2018), Workington Comets and Stoke Potters (2019), Eastbourne Eagles (2021), Newcastle Diamonds (2022) and most recently Swindon Robins (2023). It is also understood that Monmore Stadium (up until this year the home of Wolverhampton Wolves) will cease to accommodate speedway as of 2024, choosing to focus solely on greyhound racing.

- 2.11 By way of an additional proxy, the average TV viewing numbers for the sport fell from 145,550 in 2008 to just 34,000 in 2017- dropping by a further 50% in the subsequent two years.

- 2.12 Desk-based research and consultation with operators in the sector confirms that the primary driver of this decline is unsustainable revenues streams due to declining audiences and fewer broadcasting deals. Consultation undertaken directly with Manchester City Council (MCC) on 7 and 8 August 2023 about the one speedway facility in which there has been investment since 2016 (in Manchester) reveals that the sequence of events that apply to this facility is as follows:

- ◀ In 2014/15, the Greyhound track operator wanted to sell the (combined greyhound and speedway) site for housing. This would have left the speedway club - Belle Vue Aces (BVA) homeless.
- ◀ BVA approached Manchester City Council and secured (from the Council’s Strategic Development Department) some MCC capital investment plus support to secure a bank loan which BVA was due to repay.
- ◀ The capital invested secured an upgraded speedway track with improved floodlighting, corporate hospitality boxes etc., and incorporated installation of a (under-sized) 3G pitch in the centre of the track. The complex opened in 2016.
- ◀ The original arrangement was that BVA would manage the track and the hospitality (paying for a lease but retaining the income) and that MCC’s leisure operator (GLL) would manage (and retain the income from) the 3G pitch.

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- ◀ Having taken over management of the newly developed venue in 2016, BVA went into administration in 2017 leaving the City with liability for the bank loan taken out by it to partner with the Council on the development. This left MCC Strategic Development Dept., liable for the balance of the bank loan taken up by BVA and the City Council's leisure services without the promised income from the lease of the stadium.
- ◀ Primary reasons cited (by MCC) for the failed venture are low spectator demand (need) and BVA's over-optimistic business plan forecasting which did not even come close to being realised. The Club failed commercially despite it being in a new stadium and the Club itself maintaining a regular and a successful (in terms of trophies) presence in speedway.
- ◀ The MCC consultee stated that Club itself has only survived because the Council has not called in its debt.
- ◀ BVA reformed as BVA2018 and MCC (Leisure Services) has agreed to allow the Club to use the stadium on 34 days per annum for all its junior, senior and European matches. The Council's leisure operator GLL now manages the whole venue all year round.
- ◀ Under this arrangement, BVA 2018 does not pay the lease and is only paying an amount to cover the cost of utilities and services for its periods of use (on the 34 days).
- ◀ This arrangement was established based on a two-year lease in 2018 and a two-year extension was agreed in 2020 (extended to 2023 because of Covid-19).
- ◀ MCC will be asking BVA2018 to pay an improved (albeit still essentially peppercorn) rent on its lease as of financial year 2024-25.

- 2.13 The overall analysis of the City's Facilities Contracts Manager – is that speedway is a dwindling spectator sport and requires a completely new strategy if it is to successfully engage with local people – an eventuality about which she was not confident. The stadium requires additional uses and bookings to be sustainable, as speedway does not generate sufficient income to stand alone and continue. It continues to be substantively subsidised by the Council.
- 2.14 The Contracts Manager reported that the spectator base is largely male, white, 'working class' and over 50 and the impression gained is that other than a few diehard followers, attendance is an occasional rather than a regular feature of fan's habits. The secondary spend reflects the demographic and is more 'pie and pint' than a more profitable catering/event offer.
- 2.15 Brandon Stadium has been out of commission since 2016. and the evidenced instability and limited demand for other venues, both previous and potential usage levels of the speedway facility are to an extent unknown. However, it is considered unlikely that it could accommodate close to or more than 1,200 participants per week or that it could cater for comparably inclusive demand. As such, in terms of increased and broader sporting participation, it is clear that the 3G pitch would be of massively greater participation benefit and meet Paragraph 99 (c) of the NPPF and Policy HS4 (c) of Rugby's Local Plan.
- 2.16 The above analysis is further reinforced when one recognises that, when operational, the speedway provision was generally only being used for high or elite level competition. This means that it was not meeting a community sports participation need – the primary local rationale instead related to spectating. Its prior direct impact and/or wider impact on health and physical activity objectives and outcomes is thus open to question, especially when compared to 3G pitch provision.
- 2.17 Rugby Council identifies health and wellbeing objectives within its Corporate Strategy (2021-2024). This includes an aim that it will *"support residents to lead active lives, with high quality, accessible green space and recreational facilities"*. In sports participation, physical activity and numeric use terms, my opinion is that a full-sized community 3G pitch facility will deliver related outcomes to a much greater degree than a professional speedway venue could.

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- 2.18 Regardless of the above, it should be noted that only one policy exception needs to be met within both Paragraph 99 of the NPPF and Policy HS4 (c) of the Local Plan. However, no reference is made to the other NPPF exceptions within the Decision Notice.
- 2.19 Both Paragraph 99 (a) of the NPPF and Policy HS4 (c) identify that development proposals can be supported if: *“An assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements”*.
- 2.20 The KKP Speedway Viability Appraisal (April 2023 update) provides clear evidence that the provision at Brandon can be deemed to be surplus to requirements, based upon:
- ◀ The national decline in speedway (and other potential user sport) demand and participation.
 - ◀ A national decline in the number of spectators attending speedway and the loss of related commercial income.
 - ◀ The insufficient evidence of demand at a level that would make a reinstated/replacement facility commercially viable.
 - ◀ All the above having been exacerbated by the impact of cost-inflation and rising energy prices.
 - ◀ The impact of Brexit on the free movement of (and cost of employing) speedway riders..
 - ◀ The impact of Covid-19 on spectator sports *per se*.
 - ◀ Ongoing concerns in relation to the future management of environmental impact.
- 2.21 In contrast with the participation numbers generated via a 3G pitch, involvement in speedway is largely based upon spectating. Of those who do compete, certainly the professional riders, a substantial proportion tend to be from overseas. ‘Participation’ in stock car racing and greyhound racing is also almost entirely about spectating and the two do not, in any event, feature in Sport England’s list of recognised sports to which the NPPF applies.

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PART 3: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 KKP is a UK based consultancy which specialises in work in/for the sport and leisure industry, particularly in relation to planning for sport and leisure facilities.
- 3.2 In 2020, KKP delivered an appraisal to assess the need/demand for speedway and the extent to which it was realistic and viable to seek to upgrade/redevelop Brandon Stadium for speedway. Concurrently, we delivered a 3G needs assessment and 3G pitch feasibility study to gauge the demand and likely viability of development of a full-sized 3G pitch at the venue as part of wider development proposals at Brandon Stadium. Both the 2020 studies were undertaken to inform the planning application process, and both were subsequently updated (in 2023) to inform the appeal process.
- 3.3 The 3G study identifies a clear need for a 3G pitch plus ancillary facilities in the local area within which Brandon Stadium is located. There is a thoroughly evidenced 3G pitch shortfall in the locality and sufficient team-based demand from large local clubs and SBitC to ensure a full programme of use at the proposed facility.
- 3.4 KKP's speedway appraisal has concluded that the speedway provision at Brandon Stadium will not be viable based upon factors including the national decline in speedway participation and spectator numbers and the concomitant impact on commercial income. Furthermore, reinstating or replacing speedway provision to the level that will be necessary for viable competitive speedway is unlikely to be feasible based on the capital costs likely to be required to bring the stadium up to the requisite standard. This issue has been subject to further adverse impact by recent building cost inflation. According to Statista (market leader in the provision of reliable business data) construction costs in the United Kingdom reached an annual growth rate of almost ten percent in December 2022. Considering just the two years since September 2021 there has been a sharp increase in the construction output price, as it also grew by over five index points during that period.
- 3.5 An alternate reference in respect of the impact of inflation is the quarterly tender price forecast published by the Cost Intelligence Team at Faithful+Gould. This is a general estimate with regard to how market conditions affect tender prices across the whole spectrum of the property sector, regardless of specific building type and location. Its indices are forecasting a 11.5% shift for 4Q21 – 3Q23 and a further 3.4% from 3Q23 – 1Q25 so 15.3% respectively. (This is 1.3% lower than the figures published by the BCIS and reflects F&G's optimistic view which is explained by the need for contractors to fill orderbooks and secure turnover and a linked, more pragmatic, approach being taken with a growing appetite for contractors to bid for work.
- 3.6 It is noted that planning permission for the 3G pitch was refused by Rugby Council as it stated that the proposal would be contrary to Policy HS4 (c) of Rugby's Local Plan (2019) and Paragraph 99 (c) of the NPPF. The Council's contention is that there is not a clearly identified need for the alternative sporting provision proposed and that the benefits of the suggested new facility do not clearly outweigh the loss of the stadium. This contention has not been justified and the needs assessment element of both the 2020 and the 2023 3G feasibility studies have provided evidence of a clear need for the proposed alternative sporting provision. It is also my belief that the new facility will outweigh the loss of the stadium based on the increased sports participation and wider health and physical activity benefits that it offers.

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3.7 Key points of note include:

- ◀ The difficulty there is obtaining and evidence to suggest any clear need/demand for speedway – based upon the universal decline in every facet of the sport in the UK over the last 15 years and specifically over the four years since the **wyg** report was published in 2019.
- ◀ The premise of the **wyg** report appears to have been that the stadium was fit for purpose when it closed. This is not borne out by any evidence in that report - nor has any evidence to confirm this been provided since.
- ◀ The impact of building cost inflation on the likely costs of refurbishing/redeveloping the stadium particularly given the identified need to consider additional costs related to its future management having regard to its environmental impact and impact on the amenity of those in the locality.
- ◀ The actual record of speedway activities in the intervening period and the particular example of BVA 2018 in Manchester. As noted earlier, even when set up in a new stadium with a huge population catchment, extensive Council capital cost input and ongoing subsidy it has encountered very substantial financial problems. Without massive subsidy it is not a viable entity and at most is now operating on a day-to-day basis on only 34 days of the year.
- ◀ The clearly identified need for additional 3G pitch provision in this area of Rugby – validated by demand in both the borough of Rugby and the adjacent areas within the Coventry City Council Authority area.
- ◀ The clear and sizeable difference between the level of sports participation that will occur should the 3G pitch be developed relative to redeveloping the speedway stadium.

3.8 Finally, no reference to other policy exceptions is made within the Decision Notice, despite only one exception within Policy HS4 (c) of Rugby's Local Plan (2019) and Paragraph 99 of the NPPF needing to be met. The analysis points strongly to the proposition that the existing speedway provision is surplus to requirements. This is evidenced in the two speedway viability appraisals. Indeed, this conclusion has continued to be reinforced over the period that has elapsed since the **wyg** report was produced in 2019. This finding stands alone and is unaffected by the 3G feasibility study. By contrast, although there is a clear need in the locality for 3G pitch, this is irrelevant and does not need to outweigh the loss of provision.