

Campaign for Botley Skate Park

Comments on the R&A Committee Working Party's Skate Park Report, 10th Jan 2013.

We are grateful to the R&A Committee for establishing a Working Party to look into the possibility of having a wheeled sports facility in Botley. We recognise that Working party members have contributed a significant amount of time over the past few months to produce their report. However, supporters of the Campaign for Botley Skate Park believe that there are a number of inaccuracies in, and important omissions from, the R&A Working Party's Skate Park report.

Before Parish Councillors vote whether or not to have a new skate park on the Louie Memorial Playing Fields, we wanted to make them aware of some of our observations about the report and supply you with further facts so that they are better informed about the pros and cons before voting.

It was decided by the R&A Committee not to include campaign supporters, young people or skate park 'experts' on the Working Party and campaign team members were only shown the report 3 days before the deadline for questions to the Extraordinary R&A meeting so we have had *very little time* to pull these notes together. Therefore, this document does not cover all of our concerns, but we hope it provides a summary of key issues we and other supporters have found so far.

1. The Report's Remit

Our understanding was that the Working Party was set up to investigate the merits or otherwise of building a wheeled sports facility in Botley in response to a significant number of residents signing the Petition. However, the report contains a very long critique of the petition which seems to be trying to discredit the skate park campaign. A petition is not a survey, so a statistical analysis of the petition will not produce reliable data into potential usage or other matters. We feel that this analysis was not needed and its inclusion in the report is inappropriate.

In this document we have largely ignored the section on other survey data as it is inaccurate - due to low response numbers, misleading graphics and time passed since the data was collected - and therefore not useful in deciding on the appropriateness of building a skate park on the playing fields.

The Working Party accepts in their report that 736 signatures were valid, so surely the largest petition ever received by NHPC warrants serious consideration in its own right?

2. Key Omissions from the Executive Summary

The Executive Summary is *entirely* negative and does not mention anything positive about skate parks, which suggests that either proper research in to the benefits was not carried out, or that the authors deliberately decided to exclude the positive aspects.

We also disagree with the assertion on page 2 that the report is 'broadly correct'.

There was no recognition in the Executive Summary (or wider report) of the young people who initiated this campaign, the fact that we live in a very low crime area and that anti-social behaviour might be reduced by having a wheeled sports facility. The report suggests that only boys aged 10-19 would use it, despite evidence to the contrary (e.g. users at Faringdon skate park). The summary also states that the proposed site being at the top of the hill would put people off using it but we all know that young people and adults walk, bus, drive and cycle up the hill regularly to school, work, Scouts, Youth Club, Westminster College, walk dogs and the play park.

Other omissions from the summary and report include an investigation into the current use of bikes, skate boards, scooters etc. and the places children and adults ride/skate at the moment – i.e. in the roads, car parks, shopping precinct – and the problems this causes for other residents as well as the obvious safety risks for children. In the August 2012 *Update from the Rural Abingdon Neighbourhood Policing Team*, PCSO Lisa Prime writes:

'We do move people on from the precinct when they are cycling, scooting etc. in the parade. They often ask where they can go that is safe, and that they will not annoy people, this is quite difficult to answer as there is nowhere to our knowledge for us to direct them'.

The Working Party's report references the *Vale of White Horse Open Space, Sport & Recreation Provision and Strategy Background Report 2009* and from it quotes some figures about journey times to and from facilities that may affect usage to argue that people might not travel to a skate park on the playing fields in Botley. Contained in the same Vale report (Particularly in chapter 12), are survey results and conclusions that can be used to back up the case for a skate park in Botley, but these are not included in the Working Party's report. The *Open Space, Sport & Recreation Provision and Strategy Background Report* states that teen facilities are the most desired and needed across the Vale of White Horse, and of these, skate/BMX facilities are one of the most desired and effective facilities. Importantly the Vale report specifically points to Botley as having inadequate and poor value teenage facilities – again, something not mentioned by the Working Party.

3. Suitability of Location

The Upper Playing field had a skate bowl for many years which was well used and popular so there is a precedent for this sort of facility on the Playing fields. The Pavilion, MUGA and children's play equipment along with the car park and close proximity to Brookes Sports centre make the Upper Field a logical and accessible place to build a wheeled sports facility. It may also encourage use of the other equipment and facilities already in place.

The Working Party's report suggests that the playing fields are at risk of flooding, but we cannot find anyone who is aware of the fields ever being flooded. We are confident that a facility on the Upper Field would not exacerbate a flood risk – based on Environment Agency information. The Working Party quote a report by Dr Lamberth done in 2009 detailing the effect that building on the playing fields might have on flooding in the Fen and Wetland areas. Having read Dr Lamberth's report, we conclude that a 300m² skate park would add little or no flood risk to the area. This is because the catchment for the stream is 212,000m² (details on page 35 of Dr Lamberth's report). Therefore a skate park of 300m² will cover less than one seven hundredth (1/700) of the area (or 0.14%), having negligible effect on overall drainage. More importantly, modern skate parks come with excellent drainage and are designed around their specific location. Skate park contractors will commission a specific hydrology report to ensure that no harm is caused to the surrounding area.

Any facility will need to be designed around the site and in consultation with residents and potential users to ensure the majority are happy with the design's look and suitability for use by small children as well as more experienced skaters/riders. We have done some informal consultation with supporters about their needs on facebook and face-to-face whilst collecting signatures for the petition. 12 children and 4 parents attended a very productive meeting with Cllr Ag Mackeith about possible designs and features that would be most used and affordable, as well as landscaping and ways to ensure the facility would 'blend in' with the surrounding area. Ag's findings are included as an annex to the report but not, in our opinion, fully reflected in the main body of the report.

4. **Noise?**

The potential noise that a skate park might produce is referred to a number of times in the Working Party's report, but we disagree that residents will be disturbed by noise.

The distance of the nearest house from the proposed site quoted in the report is 180 meters. A recent professional acoustic report by expert Alan Saunders Associates of Winchester show that an assessment of the impact of a replacement Skatepark on nearby Residential Premises at Meadow Lane Oxford represents one at which annoyance by the skateboard noise levels at the rear facades of properties at 70 to 80 meters would be 'unlikely'. With mitigation measures included in the skate park design at this location states that the MAXIMUM skateboard noise levels that may cause complaints from nearby residents is UNLIKELY over the proposed operational hours of 10:00-21:00 hours. Expert evidence from Oxford Wheels Project (OWP) that being located on a hill makes little or no difference to potential noise levels.

5. **Anti-social behaviour?**

At various points the Working Party's Report (e.g. page 22) suggests that a skate park would increase anti-social behaviour and crime but very little evidence is provided to back up these claims. The report includes an extract from a Neighbourhood Watch meeting that also raises concerns about crime which seems to have influenced the Executive Summary, but again, these claims are not backed up by any evidence. No data is included in the report about crime levels when the skate bowl was in use and how the police dealt with any problems at the time.

The report includes statements from police in other parts of the Vale which already have skate parks but these do not back up the Working Party's concerns. In fact the officers' statements confirm that their skate parks HAVE NOT resulted in more crime, that the problems with litter are no worse than in other parts of their parks, and that having somewhere that young people gather makes it easier for the police to build a relationship with young people and deal with any problems quickly.

While we fully understand that people living close to the site (especially neighbourhood watch groups) may have concerns at this stage, we feel that further consultation with other skate park managers or members of the Campaign team would reassure residents concerned about how a skate park might affect them. The vast majority of local people from across the Parish told us they thought young people needed more places to go, have fun, socialise and exercise.

6. **Potential Usage**

The Working Party report makes the assumption that 12-19 year old (and then changes this to 10-19 year old) boys would be the main users. While undoubtedly this group would make good use of a skate park, at other skate parks many adults, girls and young children participate and/or go to watch their friends and family members play.

The assertion mentioned earlier that people wouldn't travel up the hill to use a skate park can be discounted because North Hinksey's young people and adult skaters are currently travelling by bike, bus and car to Abingdon, Didcot, Faringdon, Iffley and other parks across the country to ride and skate. If they are willing to travel these distances, why wouldn't they travel up Elms Rise slope. And if there was a skate park locally, wouldn't more people start riding their bikes and scooters more?

The Vale's *Open Space, Sport & Recreation Provision and Strategy Background Report* includes information about how much space should be given to teenage facilities based on population size. On page 127, it suggests that a facility of 500sqm would require 70-80 teenagers or 1100-1200 people in total to live within 15 minutes walking distance from any teenage facility. The skate park proposed in Botley would almost certainly be smaller than this and would also be used by families, so there should be no concerns about

levels of usage being high enough to justify its build.

Also, with various housing developments happening across North Hinksey, and notably off Lime Road, in the next few years there will be many more families and teenagers moving into our community. The expansion of Botley School will also bring more children into the area. The Working Party did not make any reference to this imminent increase in population and growing need for recreation facilities that young people would want to use.

7. Predicted Costs

Depending on the design and size of a skate park we could reasonably expect to spend between £40,000 and £130,000 on building a skate park. Along with the £12,604 insurance money and some of the Playing field and Pavilion Development fund held by the Parish Council, there are a number of grants available from the District, County Council and other sources. The Campaign for Botley Skate Park supporters would be more than happy to raise the necessary funds.

The Working Party is right to think about the on-going maintenance costs that might be involved and so include this in their report. While external funds can be obtained to cover these costs, there would be a responsibility to ensure that general management and public liability insurance was in place at Parish level.

The Working Party report quotes maintenance cost of 10% of the original capital cost on a concrete facility – so if we spent £100,000 on a new facility, it would cost £10,000 per year to maintain. However, this figure is unrealistically high. Oxford Wheels Project have a much larger skate park (£320K) than we would have in Botley and their annual maintenance costs are only £800. The cost of maintenance and cleaning the old Botley bowl in the year 2008/09 was only £258. Insurance for the skate bowl was included in the same policy as all the other equipment on the playing field, so this did not result in any additional cost. While a skate park would obviously need to be checked regularly, there is very little on a concrete facility with a few metal ramps/bars that can break. We believe the maintenance would be simpler than that required of the children's play park on the lower field – and could easily be done at the same time by the same qualified person.

8. Conclusion

For the above reasons, we believe the Working Party report in its current form is incomplete. We urge all Parish Councillors to consider carefully the points we have made above before voting for or against providing a wheeled sports facility as requested by North Hinksey residents.

If you would like any further information or contacts from us please do get in touch.
Thank you

Emily Newson, Darren Blase & Clare Megarity on behalf of Campaign for Botley Skate Park

21st January 2013