

DARLINGTON FC SUPPORTERS GROUP

Temporary Seated Stands

Options Appraisal



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Context

Introduction

In 2012, Darlington FC CIC purchased 2 temporary demountable seated grandstands from Star Events Group Ltd. The grandstands were constructed at the northern end of Heritage Park under temporary planning permission.

The grandstands are constructed of modular sections, and in their current configuration each comprises 5 blocks of 30 seats, plus 2 vertical gangways with 3 additional seats at the top of each gangway (total 156 seats per structure). The structures are supported by concrete pad foundations and are raised in order to improve sight lines, requiring a set of access steps for each vertical gangway.

The possibility of transferring the stands to Blackwell Meadows was previously ruled out on the basis that temporary structures do not count towards Ground Grading capacity calculations and the fact that a quote of £27,528 was previously received for dismantling the structures, making good the ground at Heritage Park, and reconstructing the stands at Blackwell Meadows.

In the absence of a buyer for the stands, and in the face of seemingly prohibitive costs, it has been suggested that ownership of the stands may be signed over to Bishop Auckland AFC. However, it is deemed appropriate to comprehensively re-examine all options before taking such a decision.

Match Day Experience

The DFCSG Infrastructure Development Team was founded on a number of aims and objectives, one of which is to identify additional improvements that fall outside of National Ground Grading/EFL Regulations criteria but would improve the match day experience for supporters at Blackwell Meadows.

It will not be possible to achieve this aim without listening carefully to supporter feedback, and since being appointed to the role of DFC Supporter Liaison Officer, David Collinge has made a concerted effort to gather feedback on this subject.

He first did this by opening an informal poll/discussion on Twitter. In this poll, David asked supporters to vote for one of eight items which they thought needed improving the most, namely social media, outside catering, bar, stewarding, car parking, retail, online ticketing, and match day programme. Whilst the most popular options in the vote were outside catering and parking, 6 supporters tweeted back citing vantage points inside Blackwell Meadows as follows:

- @1969Delly – *“The seats from Bishop Auckland to be placed behind the open end at Blackwell”*;
- @mattheknight – *“Viewpoints inside the ground”*;
- @stretcha75 – *“None of the above Dave, the stand out priority has to be providing places where you can get a half decent view of the game in some level of comfort”*;
- @goldmadlad – *“I agree, none of the above is an issue in my eyes, but if the barriers are full (and being 5’ 7”) means Tin Shed is my only option for a decent view”*;
- @pitlanescoop – *“None of the above, the ability to see the match would be good, can’t see much three deep so get some terracing”*;
- @walnutwally13 – *“I think the online ticketing is brilliant I would say none of the above is an immediate issue but the view around the ground is a issue because its so flat, ok if your tall*

like me but my son sometimes has a issue viewing the game he is 5 ft 6 if he is not at the front”.

David followed this up with a more formal Match Day Experience Poll. Of the 176 responses received, 12% made specific reference to sightlines/viewing facilities, despite this not being one of the given choices in the survey.

More recently, members of Darlo Uncovered held a discussion regarding the possibility of moving the temporary stands to Blackwell Meadows and Chris Stockdale received an e-mail enquiring as to whether this would be possible.

It is clear from this feedback that, at the time it was gathered, there was an appetite amongst supporters for improving spectator sight lines at Blackwell Meadows, and that some saw the temporary seated grandstands as a potential solution.

However, it should also be noted that this feedback was gathered prior to the completion of the seated stand extension, and it is not known what effect this may have had on the perceived appetite for transferring the temporary seated stands to Blackwell Meadows. Whilst it is highly likely that there is still an appetite for additional elevated vantage points inside the ground, it may be the case that any demand for additional seating has now been met. This would seem more likely given that there have been approximately 200 empty seats on each occasion since the seated stand extension was completed.

National Ground Grading/EFL Regulations

Blackwell Meadows currently meets the criteria for National Ground Grading Category B, enabling the club to play in the National League North. The ground also meets the additional requirement of ≥500 covered seats to qualify for promotion to the National League.

On promotion to the National League, Blackwell Meadows must be upgraded to Category A no later than 31st March in the season following promotion, meaning the capacity must increase to at least 4,000. Concurrently, the flat standing area behind the western goal will cease to count towards Ground Grading capacity calculations, and the capacity of Blackwell Meadows will therefore fall by 564 flat standing spaces. In other words, the Club will need to add approximately 1,500 to the current capacity by provision of terracing and/or permanent seating.

On reaching the Football League, flat standing along the touchlines will also cease to count towards Ground Grading capacity calculations, whilst the capacity must increase to at least 5,000 with 1,000 seats at the end of the first season, increasing to 2,000 seats after 3 seasons.

Meeting these requirements without making significant alterations to the current plot would require a stand at the western end of the pitch which is significantly more substantial and expensive than those built previously. Careful planning will therefore be required to ensure that any smaller structures built at that location in the interim period do not restrict the Club's ability to build such a stand.

To this end, the Infrastructure Development Team is working towards a plan for meeting future Ground Grading requirements incrementally. Due to the ongoing nature of this work, and the need to consult with various stakeholders (not least Darlington RFC), it cannot currently be stated whether the temporary stands would have to be removed following promotion to the National League or following promotion to the Football League.

Assessment of Options

Option 1: Sale

Enquiries were made as to whether a second-hand market exists for this type of structure, and if so what their likely value would be. This was originally considered to be the preferred option, with proceeds being paid into a fund for future development.

The outcome of this is that it there appears to be a surplus of temporary demountable stands in the UK, partly due to recent major events such as London 2012. No potential buyer for the stands has been forthcoming.

This option is considered unlikely to be viable.

Option 2: Relocation to Blackwell Meadows

Planning Requirements

Officers at Darlington Borough Council have indicated that they would be happy, in principle, to support the use of the stands as a temporary solution to improve Blackwell Meadows. This would be subject to obtaining the appropriate planning permission and consultations regarding ground safety/licencing requirements.

Ground Grading Context

As temporary structures cannot be counted towards Ground Grading, the stands will have to be set back far enough to avoid the losing flat standing capacity in front of them.

In order to obtain a Safety Certificate, they will also have to be raised high enough to allow spectators in the front row to see past standing spectators on occasions where the full flat standing capacity is required. This means that access steps will also be required.

The current assumption is that the stands will never count towards Ground Grading requirements. However, there is some uncertainty about whether the provision of more permanent foundations and a roof in the future would change this. Enquiries are ongoing.

Potential Locations

Three potential locations were identified at Blackwell Meadows:

- The north side of the ground;
- The open area on the south side of the ground between the pipe easement and food hut;
- The open western end of the ground.

However, the north side of the ground is not considered feasible due to a limited amount of space between the pitch perimeter fence and the clubhouse/changing rooms, as well as uncertainty regarding the underlying ground conditions (potentially affecting foundation design and cost).

The south side location was subsequently discounted due to a combination of cost effectiveness and practicality. Briefly, factors contributing to this decision were:

- The presence of an existing floodlight column, which would have to be relocated prior to construction;
- Restricted space meaning that only a limited number of seats could be constructed at this location, a significant proportion of which would be located in line with the try area rather than the football pitch;

- Limited space between the existing hard standing and external boundary fence, meaning that the external boundary fence would likely have to be reconfigured;
- The distance that the stand would have to be set back to avoid reducing the flat standing capacity, meaning that some seats may have poor sightlines to the south western corner of the pitch past the permanent seated stand.

The open western end of the ground is therefore considered the only potentially viable location for the temporary stands, though the potential for the stands to restrict maintenance access to the existing seated stand must also be considered in consultation with Darlington RFC.

Given that the structures will have to be set back to avoid reducing the flat standing capacity, this means that the back row of pad foundations will be located within the mound and will therefore be deeper than the other pad foundations. The likely cost associated with this has been factored into cost estimates later in this report.

Potential Configurations

It is considered that the best option would be to merge the structures into one stand.

This would improve the appearance of the stand and mean that only 2 vertical gangways are required as opposed to 4, producing a cost saving in relation to the number of pad foundations required and the number of sets of access steps required (2 as opposed to 4). The total capacity of the stand would be 306.

Positioning

In order to ensure good sight lines for spectators, it is considered desirable to locate the structure so that the southernmost edge is in line with the southern touchline. This would reduce the potential for the goal to obstruct sight lines. It would also make the south west corner of the ground feel more enclosed.

With regards to matches for which spectators are segregated, the potential away supporter capacities based on this location have been calculated as follows:

- A. Flat standing up to the northern edge of the stand = 480;
- B. Flat standing up to the midpoint of the stand = 530 (plus 135 unclassified seats);
- C. Flat standing in the entire western end = 615 (plus 300 unclassified seats);
- D. Flat standing up to the western edge of the seated stand = 700 (plus 300 unclassified seats);
- E. Flat standing up to the western edge of the seated stand plus 1 block of seats in the seated stand = 772 (plus 300 unclassified seats; enough for playoff matches).





Revenue Generating Opportunities

It may be possible to generate a small amount of revenue by charging supporters a small fee to use the stand. However, this is only likely to be viable in a limited number of scenarios, namely games with high attendances, games for which segregation is in place, and games which take place in favourable weather conditions.

Conversely, if use of the stand were to be offered free of charge, this may have a negative effect on the income generated from charging supporters to use the permanent seated stand, especially considering that there have been approximately 200 empty seats on each occasion since the seated stand extension was completed.

It may also be possible to clad the stand using PVC mesh or similar, creating a large potential advertising space.

Cost

Table 1 presents a schedule of cost estimates. Of these estimates, only items 1 and 11 have resulted directly from quotes/estimates. Other items have been estimated based on the professional experience of members of the Infrastructure Development Team. The costs are only intended to provide an indication of whether the project is likely to be feasible, and should be confirmed by formal cost estimates before the Club decides to proceed with the project.

It is envisaged that items 6 to 10 regarding reinstatement works at Heritage Park would be supplemented by the use of volunteer labour from the Club's fan base. It is not considered appropriate to utilise volunteer labour for the construction aspects of the project due to potential insurance and liability implications. It is also likely that setting out of foundation locations by GIS Survey can be arranged on a volunteer basis if required.

No allowance has been made for ground mats. These items would significantly increase the cost of the project and are not considered necessary as the work would be undertaken in the summer (when ground conditions are generally dry) and the type of plant required to undertake the works is lightweight in comparison to the plant used to construct the seated stand and Tin Shed.

TABLE 1: INDICATIVE COSTS			
ITEM	DESCRIPTION	SUPPLIER	COST ESTIMATE
CONSTRUCTION WORKS			
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dismantling of both stands; Transport to Blackwell Meadows; Reconstruction at Blackwell Meadows. 	Scaffolding/rigging company.	£3,500 plus VAT
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construction of 42no. mesh reinforced concrete pad foundations (including allowance for rear foundations to be twice as deep). 	Construction company.	£7,000 plus VAT
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formation of 2no. sets of 1.2m wide access steps. 	Construction company.	£500.00 plus VAT
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removal of flags and replacement on completion. 	Construction company.	£1000.00 plus VAT
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of temporary safety fencing. 	Construction company (4 weeks hire).	£1000.00 plus VAT
HERITAGE PARK REINSTATEMENT WORKS			
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day hire of a JCB 3CX with driver to remove concrete pads. 	Plant hire firm. Work to be supervised by qualified volunteers.	£250 plus VAT
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disposal of c.8m³ of concrete. 	Skip hire or demolition firm.	£500.00 plus VAT
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of 8m³ of clean soil. 	Aggregate supplier or similar.	£250.00 plus VAT
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day hire of a 5HP soil rotovator. 	Tool hire firm. Work to be undertaken by a volunteer.	£50 plus VAT
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of a suitable volume of grass seed. 	Garden centre or turf supplier.	£150.00 plus VAT
ADDITIONAL ITEMS			
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning application fee. 	Darlington Borough Council	£1,386 plus VAT
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional allowance for consultancy fees. 	Technical consultancy(ies)	£1,000 plus VAT
13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contingency allowance. 		£2,500 plus VAT
TOTAL COST ESTIMATE			£19,086 plus VAT

Potential Constraints

Should the decision be taken to transfer the seats, any plan to do so will be contingent on a number of factors to be resolved at a later date, including but not necessarily limited to:

- Consultation with DRFC with regards to both the temporary stands and any long term development plan;
- The physical condition of the stand;
- The availability of suitable contractors to undertake the works;
- The availability of funding (there is no allowance for such projects in the DFC budget).

Summary

The limited developable space remaining at Blackwell Meadows means a long-term development plan is required to ensure that the next permanent structure(s) constructed at Blackwell Meadows does not impede the Club's ability to meet future Ground Grading requirements.

Pending the production of such a plan, and in response to supporter feedback regarding the match day experience at Blackwell Meadows, it is considered necessary to review potential temporary solutions for improving sight lines at Blackwell Meadows. One such option is the relocation of the temporary demountable seated grandstands from Heritage Park.

There is no obvious market for selling the stands, and the only remaining options are therefore likely to be relocation of the stands to Blackwell Meadows or to sign ownership of the stands over to BAFC.

Key points to consider regarding relocation of the stands to Blackwell Meadows are:

- Supporter feedback consistently indicates a desire for better sight lines at Blackwell Meadows;
- Supporter feedback has previously shown that some supporters consider the temporary seated stands to be a desirable solution;
- However, this feedback was gathered prior to the extension of the permanent seated stand, and it is therefore not clear whether this is still the case, especially given that there have been approximately 200 empty seats on each occasion since the seated stand extension opened;
- The stands would not count towards Ground Grading capacity calculations, but would not reduce the capacity of Blackwell Meadows in the proposed location and configuration;
- There is some uncertainty as to whether the structures could later count towards Ground Grading requirements via provision of permanent foundations and a roof, and enquiries are ongoing. It is currently assumed that they will not form part of any long term development plan;
- The only potentially viable location for the stands is considered to be the western end of the ground. It is proposed that the stands would be combined into one 306-seat stand;
- The stand would only act as a temporary measure for improving sight lines, and would have to be removed either following promotion to the National League or following promotion to the Football League. It cannot be stated which of these potential outcomes is the most likely at this stage;
- The stand may generate small amounts of revenue on a limited number of occasions over the course of a season, but may detract from the additional revenue generated by the permanent seated stand on other occasions;
- The estimated cost of transferring the stands to Blackwell Meadows is £19,086 plus VAT. This is only indicative, and should be confirmed by formal fee quotes prior to any decision to proceed;
- Any decision to transfer the stands to Blackwell Meadows would be contingent on a number of additional factors, including but not necessarily limited to:
 - The physical condition of the structures;
 - Consultation with DRFC and other stakeholders;
 - The production of a development plan for meeting future Ground Grading requirements;
 - Obtaining the relevant planning permissions and safety certificates;
 - The availability of appropriate funds (there is no allowance for such projects in the DFC budget);
 - The availability of suitable contractors.