

Mepal Recreation Field – an asset the community is fortunate to have!

History of the Pavilion and Recreation Field

The land was sold to Mepal Parish Council by the developer Melbourn Property Company Ltd for a nominal charge in 1975, before the completion of Laurel Close as now configured and Chestnut Way. The conveyance prohibited the use of the ground for any purpose other than as a village recreation ground or any normal village or parish function or activity or for agriculture.

Drainage of the field was undertaken by Darby's of Sutton and grassed but there were no facilities and Mepal's football team started using the field for league games with a shed to change in and a bucket for a toilet!

By the late 1990's it was obvious that the Men's team would not be allowed to continue in the League without better facilities and by that time, a weekly football kick-about for youngsters was also proving popular. In 1998 a village appraisal was undertaken in Mepal surveying the views of 250 households. The survey had a staggering 85% response rate which highlighted a majority view that there should be some facilities on the recreation field.

Following the appraisal, a feasibility group was set up to examine the options available to the village. A "hands on" exhibition reinforced the views on sport and recreation demonstrated in the appraisal. Mepal Sports Action Group (MESSAGE) was formed with the aim of promoting community participation in healthy recreation by the provision of facilities for playing sports in Mepal and the surrounding area.

In September 2001 a member of MESSAGE set up Mepal Sports Junior Football Club which grew rapidly to a large and thriving group which developed despite the lack of facilities. For this group to fully develop and to incorporate with ease all sections of the community, a modern changing facility was desperately needed, offering hospitality and toilet facilities.

The whole village community benefits from the provision of a pavilion building and MESSAGE, with the support of Mepal Parish Council, worked hard to bring this bid together on their behalf. Having a pavilion enables maximum use of the recreation field by villagers and sports groups alike to promote a healthier lifestyle for all.

From 2001 the project gathered momentum and MESSAGE was set up as a charitable trust to facilitate grant applications to complete the £180, 000 project.

The Football Foundation grant funding required the installation of a new drainage scheme on the field and a Section 106 payment from ECDC from the developers of Chestnut Way, and other grant applications contributed to the total needed. Outline planning was granted in 2003 with the Parish Council agreeing to undertake the necessary drainage work needed on the field using the £30K grant from Don Arbon.

The Football Foundation grant was a joint application by MESSAGE, Mepal Juniors and Mepal Parish Council and MESSAGE organized many fundraising activities including cake stalls, fun days, coffee mornings and car boot sales to contribute to the costs and fostering community spirit. Sufficient grant funding was eventually secured to complete the project, although the costs had risen to £229,000 due to required changes in the design because of regulation changes and full planning permission was granted in 2006.

Finally, after 6 years of planning, liaising, fund raising and jumping through hoops to convince the big funders, in January 2007 building work started on the Mepal Pavilion and the project was completed with an opening ceremony in July 2007.

Drainage Issues on the pitches – a bumpy start!

By November 2009 it became clear that all was not well with the new drainage scheme installed on the field with the drainage lines sinking in many places. Although possible remedial solutions were investigated, and some remedial work undertaken it became harder to retain the focus needed to have the required regular maintenance in place to resolve the issue. By 2016 only one small juniors pitch located at the Laurel Close end of the field was fully useable.

In 2015 the Parish Council had arranged for an investigation to be carried out with a final report explaining that there was a compacted layer sitting below the surface that was effectively capping the drains and that an intensive programme of aeration and decompaction was required. The first remedial attempt was not successful, and no further maintenance was commissioned whilst the Parish Council tried to establish the reasons for the failure. Unfortunately, after a further inspection in 2016 the sports surface specialist engaged suggested that the sand used to fill the drain lines had destroyed the grass structure thus exacerbating the problem. He also commented that the lack of an adequate attenuation pond was a contributing factor and stated that a minimum of twice yearly vertidrainage and topping up with re-seeding to establish a proper grass 'carpet' over the drain line was essential in the early years. He advised that a committed maintenance programme is necessary for at least the first 3 years after any new drainage system is installed to establish a successful carpet of grass.

At the end of 2016 because the Parish Council were unable to find a contractor to carry out any further work, this resulted in a decision that football games could no longer be played on the pitch with the sad loss of Mepal Juniors in 2018 and in December 2019, Mepal Sports Seniors reluctantly decided that the lack of a home base meant they had to withdraw from the Cambs league until they had a more local pitch to play on.

Parish Council decision to use the earmarked reserves to resolve the drainage issues

In 2019, the Parish Council resolved to use the money held in the reserves account together with a grant application to Mick George to carry out the required remedial work and fully committed to the project to return the recreation ground to a suitable condition for all sport and activity. This project was delayed by the Coronavirus pandemic, but the work started in September of 2020. It should be noted that the project was entirely funded out of money that was already earmarked and had been held by the Parish Council for several years for this specific purpose plus an additional grant. These earmarked reserves were not allowed to be used for general annual parish maintenance. This starts a committed programme to restore football and broaden the use of the field to the wider community for sporting activity.

We have plenty of fields and open spaces around the village but what we need are spaces that are suitable for sports and other activities. We want to be able to restore the family fun days and have areas that residents can hire out for children's parties and other community activities that require the use of an open space. This is not expected to be a quick fix and will require our commitment to ensure a successful conclusion.

Setback for Commencement of activity on the main pitch – June 2021 inspection

Following a detailed inspection of the field and football pitch areas, although the field is looking beautiful and the work to ensure that the sub surface and drainage is working well, we are disappointed to report that the drain runs themselves are not yet in a satisfactory condition.

The unpredictable weather conditions that followed the reseeded in the spring resulted in poor seed germination and 90% of the runs haven't knitted over and still require additional work. Why does this matter? Well, whilst the field is safe to use, a slight depression when you walk over the lines is detectable. Generally, this is not because the ground is lower but because there's no carpet of grass over the drain line. This will necessitate re-seeding during the more optimal conditions in the Autumn, allowing us to carefully monitor how much more grass germinates and then carry out additional works in the late autumn in any areas that haven't recovered sufficiently with the aim of getting the main pitch playable in 2021.

Provision of sporting facilities, including suitable pitches, and changing facilities is something that is required under the terms of the original grant funded project and cannot now be reversed without substantial pay back consequences for the village.

Community views on the use for the Recreation Field

All communities have a wide range of opinions or views regarding how the Parish Council should manage its assets and meet its legal obligations. Some of you are keen footballers, some would like to see other sports provisions, some would like areas to walk dogs, or secure runs for dogs, some want wildflower verges and areas, some only want to see wildflowers in fields and want immaculate borders and greens, some want more allotments, some want lots of brambles, some want to control the brambles because of the littering issues. The list goes on! If you have specific views, then we welcome your participation at Council meetings and we have vacancies on the Parish Council that we would be delighted to fill. We have to acknowledge that the Parish Council will never please everyone, but we endeavour to evaluate the practicality and consequences of suggestions or proposals to the best of our abilities before making a minuted final decision. Even if you are not a football supporter, surely the idea of seeing groups of people and families on a Saturday and Sunday using the facilities with the subsequent benefits to mental health is to be encouraged?

Conclusion

For now, due to our obligations because of the grants awarded in the past, the Parish Council will be continuing to improve the recreation field and facilitating the return of football as soon as we can do so without detriment to the main pitch. We will also be looking at other options for other activities from other community groups. We have the full support of Cambs FA and Mepal Sports who we will be working with as we all look at any new ideas with Mepal residents (children's football and walking football are examples). We also want to help facilitate an open day as soon as restrictions allow so you can see the progress being made towards restoring this asset to its full potential.

Mepal Parish Council Statement, June 2021