

SETTING SUSTAINABLE STANDARDS

We find out how the award-winning team at London Youth Sport Trust turned a failing site into a high-standard, sustainable sports facility for the Dulwich and wider south-London community

BY KAREN MAXWELL, EDITOR

When it comes to proactive teamwork, the combined efforts of a group of trustees, grounds experts and volunteers has resulted in the impressive transformation of Griffin Sports Ground from a run-down facility into a high-quality, multi-use sports grounds in south London. And in doing so they've set a high benchmark for sustainable facility management too.

Set in the beautiful leafy suburb of Dulwich Village, the seven-acre area was originally a private sports club, owned by Sainsbury's, before the lease was transferred to King's College

London as one of three sports venues for students. However, over the years the sports surfaces were rarely used and fell into disrepair.

The team of trustees at London Youth Sport Trust secured a 30-year lease for the land ownership from the Dulwich Estate in 2022 and began ambitious plans to convert the failing facility into a sustainable, well-maintained home ground for Lambeth Tigers FC and the women and girls section of Dulwich Cricket Club, as well as a multi-sport facility for the neighbouring community – in particular female cricketers and underprivileged youngsters.

According to Stephen Grey, London Youth Sport Trust co-founder and chair, he and Sean Keaton, Trust co-founder and its first cricket lead, led the renovation and sustainability plan to improve the ground, but the project's success was largely due to exceptional team effort.

PLANNING AHEAD

The team included grounds staff members Philip Down, who has since been succeeded by Haydn Lawrence, and Matt Grice; the Trust's operations director, Sinead Blake; and trustees Sean Keaton, Mark Henderson, Andrew



LONDON YOUTH SPORTS TRUST





Above: Griffin Sports Ground's transformation is providing a sports resource to people from all backgrounds, and of all ages and abilities

Opposite page, left to right: Jordan Sports Ground Solutions renovate the football pitch; sand application is key to drainage; waterlogged pitch before the works began

Low, Jamahl Jarrett, Aisling Roberts and Stephen – plus willing volunteers.

“Before we signed the lease, we spent two years understanding the issues around the operation of the ground, how we could reduce its environmental footprint and what partnerships were needed to ensure a successful outcome,” explains Stephen. When the lease was exchanged, they knew they had inherited a run-down ground with unusable cricket squares; uneven, compacted football pitches with broken drains; no irrigation system; and a subsiding clubhouse that ran up huge energy bills.

“This meant we had to deal with pitch surfaces that were virtually unplayable, as they were waterlogged for much of the winter and rock hard during the summer,” he says.

Regarding the acquisition of adequate funding to support the works needed, the team initially engaged with Sport England, which recommended they start with a feasibility study for the ground’s overall design and sustainability goals. As such, the Trust appointed James Mathie from Sporting Assets consultancy.

EXPERT ADVICE

The next stage involved detailed discussions with potential funders Sport England, the Football Foundation, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and Southwark Council, as well as engagement with all stakeholders that planned to use the ground.

In addition, the team sought expert advice from agronomist Peter Jones, irrigation advisor Adrian Handbury, ECB expert Dan Musson, consultant David Bates of Total Play and GMA current key account manager Daniel Bradley.

“This initial phase helped us to develop a masterplan, ensured there were no misunderstandings regarding joint buy-in and helped us stay almost entirely within the projected budget,” Stephen says.

PROJECTED OUTCOMES

Clear objectives were devised from this initial research, noting that the use of sustainable materials and operations were key parts of the overall project.

These included the need to save energy and boost income within the clubhouse by monitoring energy inputs, ensuring adequate insulation and upgrading the kitchen area. To upgrade football and cricket pitch standards, they needed to repair the pitch drainage and install an irrigation system. Further, the introduction of a sink borehole would enable easy access to clean, non-chlorinated water.

Annual grass pitch maintenance was also high on the list of objectives, including decompaction works and topdressing. Smart monitoring devices would also be used to monitor rainfall, soil temperature, the use of irrigation and the borehole to reduce running costs and environmental impact.

The Trust needed to generate regular income to invest in ongoing grounds maintenance, so made plans to replace an abandoned bowling square with

FUNDING FACTS

PROJECT FUNDING INCLUDED

£360,000
from the ECB

£150,000
from Sport England

£95,000
from the Football Foundation

£50,000
from Surrey Cricket Foundation

£150,000
from Southwark Council

£40,000
fundraising from private donors

TOTAL COSTINGS OF RENOVATION

£280,000
Drainage project

£229,000
Irrigation and borehole project

£75,360
New cricket square

£295,000
Eight-lane bowling net facility

£25,000
Cricket equipment

£145,000
Clubhouse renovation (supported by £40,000 of private donations)

eight-lane cricket nets and a Kids' Clubhouse. This would be hired out to clubs and schools, with income put towards contractor fees.

MONEY TALKS

Gathering data and presenting it effectively was key to the Trust gaining the required grants from funding agencies. This resulted in an investment of more than £1m on cricket and football pitch renovations, a new irrigation system, cricket nets, a clubhouse upgrade and the borehole installation.

Additional funding was also gained through the Trust's reserves and via a crowdfunding initiative, which Stephen says received welcomed community support. "From £10 donations to someone selling their Jaguar car and giving us the proceeds – the support has been fantastic," he says.

Members of the local community have also volunteered in the project. When I visited the site, a neighbour was reconstructing the Kids' Clubhouse (at no cost), and Stephen says volunteers have also helped with writing reports, supported fundraising initiatives and helped to manage busy event days.

"We try to keep the local community up to date with everything that we do, from highlighting volunteer opportunities available to the expectation of noisy grounds works," Stephen says, adding that the Trust matches the volunteers' skills with the tasks they undertake to ensure efficiency, and that professionals are brought in when needed.

BRINGING IN THE PROS

Regarding project contractors, local pitch contractors Jordans Sports Ground Solutions Ltd renovated the cricket square and football pitches, Agripower installed the drainage and irrigation schemes and Nicholls Boreholes obtained a licence from the Environment Agency to enable a borehole extraction and drill.

According to Jordans Sports Ground Solutions managing director Ian Jordan, one of his company's first tasks was to rebuild the cricket square as it was "facing the wrong way". He says: "We did a full pitch renovation up to 150mm in depth, and added cricket loam, and I can honestly say it's now one of the best cricket surfaces in the area," adding that regular maintenance includes irrigation, aeration and drag-matting.

“ THE IMPACT OF THE TEAM'S WORK HAS RESULTED IN A REDUCTION OF ENERGY USE AT THE UPGRADED FACILITY. 'THE WATER BILL ALONE HAS DROPPED FROM £8,000 A YEAR TO £500' ”



Above: Matt Grice, Ian Jordan and Stephen Grey with the 2025 GMA Environmental and Sustainability Impact Award

Poor weather had an impact on the football pitch renovation timeline so the drainage work couldn't start as planned at the end of the football season. Stephen says they had to budget for the significant income loss during this time.

WINNING STRATEGY

Today, the impact of the project team's work has resulted in a reduction of energy use at the upgraded facility, which works to budget. "The water bill alone has dropped from £8,000 a year to £500, thanks to the borehole," Stephen says.

This budget control allows for ongoing investment in grounds care, the employment of quality grounds staff and a big increase in the playing surfaces' carrying capacity.

And, importantly, Griffin Sports Ground has become a highly popular year-round community asset for sports participants from all backgrounds, and of all ages and abilities.

Their dedication resulted in the London Youth Sports Trust winning the Environmental and Sustainability Award at this year's GMA Awards – and deservedly so.