

## Fields in Trust: protecting the 'where'

**Keen to find out what the National Playing Fields Association has been up to since it began to operate under the name of Fields in Trust, *The Leisure Review* headed to Kings Cross and rang the doorbell opposite The Guardian HQ. FIT chief executive Alison Moore-Gwyn was good enough to let us in.**

In 2006 the National Playing Fields Association undertook a major rebranding and emerged as Fields in Trust equipped with a new name and logo but essentially the same message, albeit with a new emphasis on getting its message heard, on behalf of recreational open space across the UK. Since 1925 the organisation has worked to ensure that everyone, whatever their age, ability or location, has access to outdoor space for sport, play and recreation, protecting more than 1,260 playing fields covering a total of almost 9,000 acres along the way.

As Alison Moore-Gwyn explained, the rebranding exercise was perhaps more a question of emphasis than change per se. "We didn't feel the message was getting across as needed," she said. "We are in the business of safeguarding and supporting areas for outdoor recreation. We have always lobbied and undertaken research but we wanted to reflect that we support open spaces for areas other than sport."

In recent years the disposal of playing fields – and Fields in Trust reckon that some 6,000 were lost to development between 1992 and 2009 – has been the subject of intense debate, claim and counter-claim as the pressure on local authority budgets has steadily increased. With the London Olympic Games so dominant among the sporting and non-sporting headlines, what, we wondered, is the current profile of open spaces among those making the important decisions?

"You can generally divide playing fields into school playing fields and what we might call recreation grounds, the local rec that so many people grew up with," said Moore-Gwyn. "School fields have a solidly better statutory protection but local recs are probably used by a greater number of people. The recs are safeguarded only through the efforts of local people, unless they are over a certain size – about an acre – and actually marked out with sports pitches."

The planning legislation has traditionally been the ground over which the battle to protect playing fields has been fought, with greater protection achieved in 2004 when the planning legislation was amended. At the time the secretary of state at the Department for Education acknowledged the role of the Fields in Trust campaign but subsequent changes to education legislation have raised new issues.

"The 2004 legislation is not applicable to academies and so many schools are now becoming academies," Moore-Gwyn said. "Academies may well have different agendas so although in the current economic climate a lot of the developers have gone quiet new threats to open space can emerge."

Anyone familiar with the work of Fields in Trust under its former name may be reassured to find that the Six-Acre Standard, the planning guide familiar to all developers, lawyers and local authorities working in the public realm, is still widely regarded as the benchmark for quantity, quality and accessibility for the provision of open space. It has been recast under a new title, Planning and Design for Outdoor Sport and Play, but it remains essentially the same document, expanded and revised to include current guidance on areas such as environmental standards, sustainability and playground design.

If Planning and Design for Outdoor Sport and Play represents a clear link with the history of Fields in Trust as an organisation, the Queen Elizabeth II Fields Challenge is a clear commitment to the future. This project is using 2012, the year of the Queen's diamond jubilee, as an opportunity to put public recreational

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spaces of all kinds under the spotlight and engage the public in the process of safeguarding spaces for future generations. That the Olympic Games are coming to London at the same time is for Moore-Gwynn a happy coincidence and a huge opportunity.

"The context of the Queen Elizabeth II Fields Challenge is the Olympics and the Queen's diamond jubilee" she said. "Together they offer a once-in-a-lifetime chance to raise the profile of sport and physical activity in people's minds. At Fields in Trust we feel that we have always safeguarded the 'where' of physical activity to other people's 'what' and this is certainly a fantastic opportunity to safeguard active spaces."

The Queen Elizabeth II Fields Challenge will give communities an opportunity to vote for an outdoor space in their area to become part of the scheme and be permanently protected as a tribute to the Diamond Jubilee. Local authorities, parish councils and land owners have been invited to nominate areas of open space that they would like to see protected and, if selected, these spaces will be given QEII Field status, providing a deed of dedication and long-term protection. This protection also offers a degree of flexibility to recognise that the demands of communities and recreational pursuits may change and evolve over time. The Duke of Cambridge, until recently better known as Prince William and currently better known as the husband of Kate Middleton, is the patron of the scheme and has apparently thrown himself into the task with no little enthusiasm. The Duke's patronage of the QEII Fields Challenge continues a family link with the NPFA and Fields in Trust that includes his grandmother, the Queen, serving as patron and his grandfather, the Duke of Edinburgh, serving as president for more than 60 years. The QEII Fields Challenge is also a clear echo of the King George V Fields, the 471 playing fields that were established in memory of the William's great-grandfather who founded the NPFA in 1925.

Fields in Trust hope to have 2,012 fields safeguarded under the QEII banner by the jubilee next year, which Moore-Gwynn conceded is "an ambitious target". They are, however, well on the way and those working on the scheme have been buoyed by the widespread enthusiasm for the scheme, even in some areas not traditionally associated with enthusiasm for commemorating royal occasions. Parish and town councils have responded in significant numbers, as have the higher level local authorities, which had not been expected to engage so readily. With a nice touch of irony the number of applications from royal boroughs has been something of a disappointment but the great variety of sites nominated – everything from coastal land to tiny village playgrounds – has been encouraging. Moore-Gwynn was also keen to acknowledge the support of numerous national governing bodies for sport which have added their name to a letter sent to local authorities which extols the virtues of the scheme, noting that it is very rare for governing bodies to work in a concerted way.

"It's a great message for next year," Moore-Gwynn said. "I'm sure the public will be very positive about the scheme, as well as the jubilee and the Olympics. It will be an extraordinary year. The Queen Elizabeth II Fields Challenge is the best opportunity we've had since the King George V Fields to raise the profile of what we fight for. Without protection playing fields remain a sitting duck for developers, whether now or in ten years time, and the sale [of open space] is often too tempting for local authorities feeling the effects of cuts."

In any conversation that includes the word 'Olympic' the word 'legacy' is never far behind and this was no exception but Moore-Gwynn's perspective emphasised the positive opportunity that Fields in Trust are providing: "The QEII Challenge will offer the cheapest legacy for the jubilee for local authorities; it will only involve the cost of a plaque. It also offers a project to take the place of the absent Olympic legacy. Fifty years after the 2012 Games have been and gone the QEII Fields will still be there and the King George V fields are perhaps the only memorial to the last time the Games were held in the UK."

An affordable, highly cost-effective, UK-wide legacy for the London Olympics with a focus on physical activity and community engagement was an idea that barely survived Lord Coe's journey back from Singapore but the QEII Fields Challenge may be the opportunity to re-energise it. Alison Moore-Gwynn certainly thinks so.

"The subject of safeguarding recreational space can be quite dry," she said,, "but I like to think that we're the thinking person's charity. The simple fact is that the 'what' couldn't happen without the 'where' and that's what we do."

Find out more about the Queen Elizabeth II Field Challenge at  
[www.qe2fields.com](http://www.qe2fields.com)

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