



Very Special Circumstances Assessment Proposed Extension to Existing Sand Arena

Ham Polo Club, Petersham Road, Petersham, Richmond, TW10 7AH

Background

The site refers to Ham Polo Club, which consists of a polo field, equestrian track and various buildings associated with the use of the club such as stables, offices and club house. To the North West of the site there is an existing sand arena which is enclosed by a timber fence. The area to the south of the existing sand arena which would form the area for the extension is used by the club for stick and balling. The club currently uses the existing small arena for horse jumping / riding lessons, but the uses are restricted by the arena's inadequate size. An extension to the arena, as proposed in this application, would be of massive benefit to the club and its members by safely facilitating a much broader spectrum of uses, including winter polo, riding lessons in the winter months, schooling for lunging/dressage and jumping for non polo.

Being able to use the sand arena for the previously mentioned equestrian activities throughout the year, but especially in the winter, would help to establish a more even usage of the club throughout the course of the year, rather than just during the summer season which runs from April - September.

Currently, horses at the club are turned out on the grassed area to the north of the existing sand arena. This is problematic as trespassers are free to wander on to the land and come into contact with the horses, which poses a health and safety risk to the public and horses alike. There have been numerous issues in the past with dogs running onto the area and the public feeding the horses. The proposed enlarged sand arena would also provide a safer, more practical area for turning out the horses, as well as the other uses described above.

Winter Polo

Part of the use of the proposed extended Sand Arena would be Winter Polo. Winter Polo, sometimes called Arena Polo, is a smaller, faster paced version of traditional polo which is played on an all-weather surface and has its own rules. The typical game consists of four chukkas (or periods) of six and half minutes each.

The sport is played on a smaller pitch than traditional polo, which is fully enclosed by angled walls of five feet tall. The ball has the same characteristics as a mini football and is larger and softer than the hard plastic ball used in outdoor polo. Due to the smaller pitch size players use the inclined perimeter walls to bounce and pass the ball off, similarly to indoor football, so the requirement for a solid, close boarded fence is imperative. In comparison, the ball used for traditional polo is smaller and harder and bears more resemblance to a cricket ball, and will not bounce as high as a winter polo ball when struck. This is why a traditional polo field only has a 200mm high kick board to its perimeter.

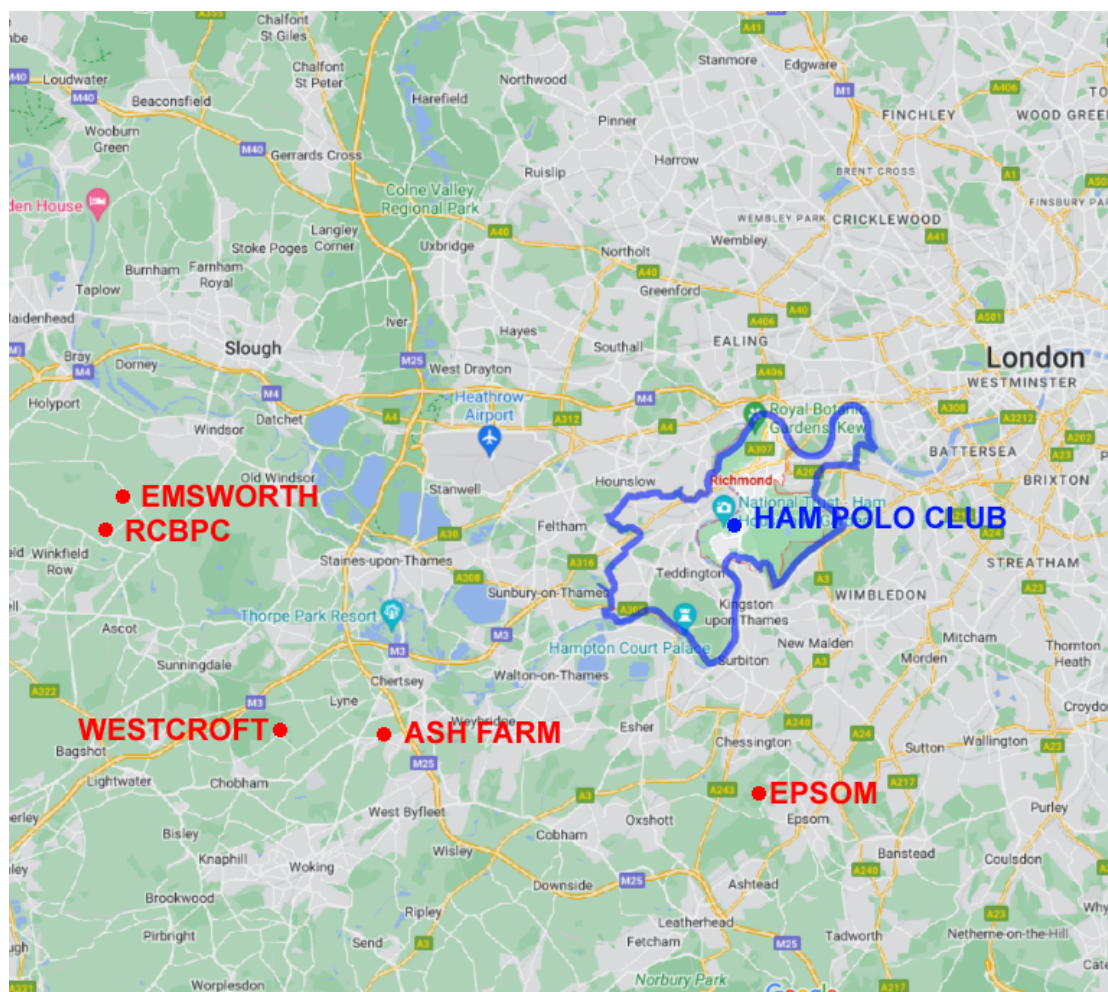
A Winter Polo team is made up of three players, meaning that the whole team has to commit to either attack or defence, quickly switching between the two, meaning the pace of the game is a lot quicker. Winter Polo also makes a great introduction for beginners and novice players as it is a great way to learn to play polo.

USE

The site for the extended sand arena falls within the Richmond's MOL area, and as such the NPPF states that the Council will not approve applications that are considered inappropriate development. However, if the Very Special Circumstance (VSC) and Need Exception are met, then permission should be granted. This report will set out the applicant's case for the VSC in line with the NPPF, to show how any potential harm on the openness of the MOL is outweighed by other considerations, including community benefit and further mitigation.

SIMILAR FACILITIES

The Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA) is the governing body for Polo in the UK, Ireland and many other countries throughout the world. The HPA website lists clubs which offer Traditional Polo, and also lists clubs that offer Winter Polo. The map below shows the location of the nearest polo clubs with an arenas.



The Borough of Richmond on Thames is outlined in blue. If approved, the Sand Arena at Ham Polo Club will be the only arena in the Borough. The table below shows the distance to each representative club on the map, and their distance away from Ham Polo Club

Club	Distance from Ham Polo Club
Emsworth	25 miles / 60 mins by car
Royal County of Berkshire Polo Club (RCBPC)	24 miles / 60 mins by car
Westcroft Park	25 miles / 50 mins by car
Ash Farm	18 miles / 55 mins by car
Epsom	10 miles / 45 mins by car

The proposed Arena offers a clear strategic value to the Borough of Richmond on Thames, as it would be the only such facility within the Borough. The local community currently has a significant journey to reach any of the closest similar facilities, and so the location at Ham Polo Club is within the public interest. It will provide the community with access to Polo throughout the winter months, as well as other equestrian uses.

LOCATION OUTSIDE OF MOL

One test required as part of the VSC is to identify if there are sites outside of MOL where the development could take place.

Ham Polo Club is a very well established club, which dates from 1926. As such it offers all the facilities required to support such a sand arena. Firstly, the on-site office staff deal with the administrative aspects of polo matches, polo lessons and riding lessons. The on site livery, with yard manager, stable manager and grooms, enable the care of the horses to support both polo and other equestrian activities. Any such Arena requires a similar livery and administration set up, so other sites in locality would not be suitable, given this lack of infrastructure.

Whilst there are a number of clubs within the South East of England, as was previously discussed these are all too far away to be of any use to the local community, who would benefit from the proposed facility at Ham Polo Club.

Further to this, The University of Roehampton have expressed a firm interest in using the arena to develop the University of Roehampton Polo Club and the South West London Universities League. The University of Roehampton is located 4.5 miles away from Ham Polo Club. This further reinforces that the proposed site is the correct location for such a facility, and will be of clear benefit to the local community, of which the University of Roehampton are part of. The full letter is listed below:

Dear Howard,

We were very pleased to hear about your plans to develop a Polo Arena at Ham Polo Club, especially given our own plans here at Roehampton Sports to set up the University of Roehampton Polo Club which is scheduled to be launched in September this year.

By doing so we aim to open up the sport of Polo to our diverse and vibrant community of over 10,000 students hailing from over 100 different countries from around the world. In doing so giving our students an invaluable experience in participating within a sport that they would otherwise not have had access to or indeed had even considered possible to play.

Our own plans include to eventually go on and become part of the Schools and Universities Polo Association and its proposed South West London Universities League which would include other Higher Education Institutions such as Surrey, Kingston and St Mary's Twickenham.

As a result of which Ham Polo Club and its proposed Polo Area would potentially play a pivotal role in the development of the University of Roehampton Polo Club and in turn the South West London Universities League.

Your vision in wanting to turn Ham Polo Club and its proposed Polo Arena into a sporting centre of excellence and to widen community participation in terms of diversity and inclusivity is only to be commended.

We look forward to developing a partnership with Ham Polo Club for the benefit of students here at Roehampton and bringing Polo back home to Roehampton where it began in the United Kingdom over 120 years ago.

Best regards,

James

James Ayres

Head of Sport and Active Communities

Sport and Active Communities

University of Roehampton

London

SW12 5PU

MINIMUM FACILITIES OF REQUIRED USE

The size of the arena and the design of the fence has been designed to the standards set out by the HPA for Arena / Winter Polo. The letter from the HPA shown overleaf further clarifies that the design of the arena and its fence are essential for winter polo to safely and effectively take place.



September 28th, 2022

Dear Richmond on Thames Borough Council,

We have been approached by Ham Polo Club regarding the planning application for their extended Sand Arena, which will allow the club to improve their facilities and to offer Arena Polo all year round, to club members and the local community alike, as well as a host of other equestrian uses.

The Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA) is the governing body for polo in the UK, Ireland and other overseas affiliated clubs and countries. We are responsible for the regulations and rules under which the game is played at those affiliated to the HPA. The object of the HPA is to further the interests of polo generally and support the common interests of its affiliated clubs and associations.

We were thrilled to learn of Ham's potential new facility but understand that it is a complex site with many planning issues. We hope that this letter can help to clarify a few of the issues raised by Richmond Borough Council.

Firstly, we would like to reiterate that the HPA is responsible for the rules and regulations under which the game is played, and this includes Arena Polo. We agree the rules and prescribe the dimensions for the arenas on which the game can be played, and approve all new arenas requiring affiliated status in order for matches and tournaments to be recognised by the HPA. It is very important for all arena facilities to be suitable for polo and therefore of a similar size, with a similar height boundary in order to provide continuity and safety for ponies and players alike.

Any arena should be surrounded by a solid fence at least five foot high (1.5m) is the ideal from the playing surface, which should be on a 7 degree incline to allow the ball to bounce back into play. We understand that Ham proposed facility has a 1.45m external height solid fence, on the correct angle. The HPA would consider this acceptable, given the variance that may occur with the inside surface, the knowledge that Ham run successful national level outdoor competitions to the correct standards so students aren't restricted to just Arena polo and the overall benefit that the facility would have on the sport as a whole, and would conclude that the facility as currently proposed would be fit for Arena Polo.

The HPA are also responsible for furthering the interests of Polo generally, and a major part of this is ensuring Polo is available and accessible to the entire community inclusively. Under our #trypolo scheme, the HPA worked with affiliated clubs to develop polo experience packages to suit all budgets and abilities, from complete beginners through to experienced players. These packages provided a pony to learn to play on, as well as experienced HPA polo accredited instructors to ensure maximum enjoyment and safety. Ham Polo Club was signed up to this scheme but could only offer the experience during the summer months. If they are successful in their bid to gain planning approval for the enlarged arena then it will afford them to offer lessons all year round, which would help to encourage a wider reach to the local community.

There are currently no affiliated clubs in the Borough of Richmond who have an Arena Polo Facility. The proposed facility at Ham would be massively beneficial to HPA's initiative to try to get more people actively involved in Polo.

We are also very pleased to hear that Ham Polo Club will be working with the Schools and Universities Polo Association (SUPA) should this application be successful. We fully support their initiative with Roehampton University to form a South West London Universities league. The inclusion of a wider diverse group of young people would be a tremendous step to bringing more new players into the sport.

We do hope that this helps to clarify the HPA's stance on the proposed facility and that it is designed to an acceptable standard for Arena Polo. We also hope that Richmond Borough Council will recognise just how beneficial to the sport the Arena would be, in terms of helping to offer Polo to all ages and abilities within the local community.

Josh Tuthill
HPA Director of Sport

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Josh Tuthill', written in a cursive style.

MITIGATION

Landscape Proposals

Ham Avenues Restoration Management Plan

The landscaping scheme has been updated to reflect the Ham Avenues Restoration Management Plan (HARMP), provide tree planting that reflects the historic landscape setting to Ham House and its Registered Park and Garden, and deliver a Biodiversity Net Gain.

In terms of the HARMP, the landscaping scheme now proposes a species-rich native hedgerow, predominantly hawthorn, along the west boundary of the Site adjoining Melancholy Walk. This directly delivers the objective of the HARMP to:

'Plant thorn hedgerow along Polo Club boundary for future laying'

In turn this planting, in combination with native planting alongside the proposed arena, will soften its appearance while not unduly restricting outward views from Melancholy Walk. The height at which this planting is maintained can be secured under a Landscape & Biodiversity Management Plan, agreed by way of planning condition.

No other objectives of the HARMP appear to be applicable to the Site or its immediate landscape setting. The proposed scheme has therefore responded positively to the document wherever possible.

Historic Landscape Setting

In terms of the historic landscape setting of the Site, and its proximity to the Ham House Registered Park and Garden (RPG) –the Arboricultural Assessment submitted in support of the application (ref: GL1457 Arboricultural Assessment – Issue 2 27-09-21) provided a short appraisal of the Site as pictured in aerial photography from 1945, see paragraph 4.16 to 4.19 inclusive. The Assessment highlighted that trees previously existed along the north and east boundary of the Site. This tree cover is similarly shown on the 1893 Ordnance Survey for the area. In summary, at the late 19th and early 20th century, and likely earlier, trees were present around the north and east of the Site, forming a framework of mature tree cover that provided a backdrop to Melancholy Walk and the eastern extent of the RPG.

The revised landscaping scheme (GL1457 07A) proposes tree planting to the north and east of the Site that will reinstate the historic framework of tree cover that existed on the Site. This includes the planting of lime and oak trees which are characteristic of the Registered Park & Garden.

Please note, part of the tree planting proposed alongside the east of the Site is outside of the application boundary, but within blue-land within the control of the Applicant. This planting can be secured by way of a standard planning condition to implement off-site planting. Its long-term management would be secured under an overarching site management plan.

Biodiversity Net Gain

The BNG results demonstrate that a 23% net gain in habitat units and 100% gain in hedgerow units can be delivered within the application boundary, exceeding the standard 10% net gain

target that the Government is seeking to mandate. The condition of existing and proposed habitats is appropriately assessed, ensuring the habitats proposed, and correlating net gain, are realistic and deliverable. Off-site tree planting has not been included in the metric and would be an additional benefit to the Site. As noted above, it is the intention that post-development habitats would be managed under a Landscape & Biodiversity Management Plan. This would cover a 30-year period of management of monitoring of the proposed habitats and details of how each habitat will be maintained to achieve its target condition. It is requested that details of the management plan are agreed by planning condition.

Should any consultees require modifications to the proposed landscaping scheme, for example alterations to proposed species mixes, these could also be addressed by way of planning condition.

BENEFITS

As well as traditional Polo matches, Ham Polo Club provides polo lessons and riding lessons on a day to day basis throughout the summer months, with participants predominantly being non members. For example, a study of the club's most recent data from July 2022 shows that 27 riding lessons and 102 polo lessons were undertaken. Riding and Polo Lessons are predominantly on a one on one basis, with the occasional group session. In July 2022 there were 8 group sessions in total, with typically 6 participants per group.

The club currently predominantly undertake these lessons in the summer months, due to ground conditions and safety, as the participants are largely beginners and can be inexperienced riders. In the winter months, numbers are reduced to a handful of lessons across weekends only. The extended sand arena will be able to accommodate these activities, as well as winter polo, throughout the entire year which will clearly be of benefit to the local community, given the use of what will be a first class facility. The extended sand arena will also enable more group sessions, due the perimeter fence and the additional security that it will provide.

Taking July 2022 as a typical month, a simple estimate at the potential numbers is as follows:

Polo Lessons = 102
Riding Lessons = 27
Total = 129 lessons.

Of the 129 lessons, 8 were group sessions, with 6 participants per group
= $129 - 8 + (8 \times 6)$
= 169 Participants per month

So this gives a reliable estimation of predominantly non member participants of 169 per month. Given that the club currently have full time lessons between April - September, that leaves the 6 months between October - March where the extended arena could facilitate 1014 additional participants per year which would predominantly be to non members.

The reality is that this number could be higher given the arena's ability to enable more group sessions as previously discussed. Even if it assumed that a third of these lessons (38 per month) could be group lessons, that would give a projected monthly community participation number as follows:

Of the 129 lessons, 8 were group sessions, with 6 participants per group
= 129-38 + (38x6)
= 319 Participants per month

Taking July 2022 as a typical month, the following breakdown shows the demographic of the 169 participants:

Age: 20% of lessons were under 8s
 37% were aged 8-21
 18% under 40
 25% over 40s

Location: 52% were from within a 2 mile radius
 38% were from London Boroughs
 The remaining 10% were from further afield

The above data shows how the extended Sand Arena will benefit a broad demographic of the local community, and London Boroughs. As previously discussed, the extended sand arena would allow a similar number of participants throughout the winter months as well. Using the numbers above as representative of a typical month, the arena would create around an additional 1,000 sessions per year, benefitting close to 2,000 people, given that there would be more group sessions in the summer months with the extended arena in place. Using the location demographic figures above, the Arena is likely to benefit around 1040 per year, for people living within a 2 mile radius, and a further 760 per year from the London Boroughs.

In order for the club to ensure that the facilities will be advertised to the local community, they would continue to advertise within local publications including the Ham and Petersham Magazine, provide leaflets at the Visitors Information Desk at Richmond Station and through door drops, advertise on various social media platforms and at the University Freshers Fairs at Roehampton University. Utilising all of the above avenues would ensure that the facilities would be marketed to a broad range of the local community.

Ham Polo Club's website also advertises and promotes their facilities for learning to ride and learning to play polo. www.hampoloclub.com/learn-to-play-1 gives details on how to arrange lessons, hire equipment and ponies, and also the process of learning to play polo. It has testimonials from previous participants.

Ham Polo Club currently has a waiting list for both horse riding lessons and polo lessons for non club members, as is documented in the letter from the General Manager at the club shown overleaf.

Many of the previous Stables and Riding Schools surrounding Richmond Park have been lost over the years, and as such the amount of riding schools and lessons available in the borough are in decline. This is mainly a result of the high resale cost of development sites in the area and they are being sold on to developers to build flats. Most recently Kingston Riding School has moved to a site in Chessington which is over 30 minutes drive away. Ham Polo Club's extended Arena will help to supply riding lessons back to the community and ensure that the availability of equestrian activities to the local community is secured for years to come.



Petersham Road
Richmond
TW10 7AH
23 September 2022

To Whom It May Concern,

I'm writing to you in regard to the current waiting list that Ham Polo Club has for riding lessons. We welcome anyone in our community wanting to use our facilities by booking lessons with our trained and licensed coaches.

We currently have a waiting list of 49 individuals waiting for horse riding lessons, unfortunately, we cannot fulfill these requests within our current capacity. The figure above is just for riding lessons, for adults and children. We have another waiting list of 8 individuals wanting to learn how to play polo at our club.

I trust you find this information useful.

Should you require any other information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance

Sincerely,

Mrs. Tracey Belgrove

General Manager, Ham Polo Club

Barnfield Riding School

Ham Polo Club have also approached Barnfield Riding School during a fundraiser at the Polo Club to inquire about potentially hiring out the extended sand arena, and received the following response:

Dear Howard,

Following our recent fundraiser at Ham Polo Club I can confirm that BRS would be interested in taking part in further community fundraising events possibly using your planned enlarged arena.

The idea of equestrian events on a suitable surface during the winter and your proposal to hold a jousting competition open to the public at Christmas time to raise funds for BRS and other charities would certainly be of great interest to us.

Hopefully this will also support with maintaining equestrianism as a prominent part of local life and given the location near to Ham House a medieval weekend with horses, tents, costumes and traditional food could be a lovely family friendly annual occasion.

I would once again like to thank you for arranging the fundraising evening last month, the funds raised will make a big difference

Looking forward to seeing you soon.

Kind regards,

Patsyanne Rose

Chairman BarnField Riding for the disabled

The supportive email above emphasises another community benefit of the proposed facility in terms of the potential to help smaller, local riding schools to further their provision and hold fundraising events at any time of the year.

University of Roehampton

As was previously discussed earlier in this report, Roehampton University have expressed a strong interest in using the facility for their Polo Club and to assist with the delivery of the South West London Universities Polo League. This will enable the benefits of the facility to reach far and wide into the community.

CONCLUSION

The letter from the HPA listed previously in this report emphasises the potential that the Arena has to bring new people into the sport, similarly to their #Trypolo initiative. The arena will be used to enhance Ham Polo Club's provision of Polo to players of all ages and abilities throughout the year, and will benefit from the administrative infrastructure that is already in place. This report has demonstrated that there is clear interest in the facility, as indicated by the current summer uptake and waiting lists discussed previously, and if approved, will be of clear benefit to the local community.

Whilst the proposed extension to the existing sand arena is deemed to not be appropriate development within the MOL, this report has demonstrated that the Very Special Circumstances test is sufficiently met. It will be the only facility within Richmond Borough Council's boundaries. The location at an already established Polo ground is critical to the success given the established livery, admin office and staff, and the facility could not be sited outside of the MOL for this reason. The arena is designed to the minimum standards as this is confirmed by the HPA. Sufficient mitigation in the form of additional tree planting has been proposed, and the facility will offer clear benefits to the community as well as to members of the club, and the infrastructure is already in place to achieve this.