

The SRU, the Wanderers, Roseburn Park or

Ruth Davidson- please act for your constituents over SRU antics!

In Edinburgh, on the 23rd June 2016, the night of the EU referendum, the [Friends of Roseburn Park](#) hosted a public meeting at which the [Murrayfield Wanderers Rugby Club](#) announced their plans to move from their home on the back pitches at Murrayfield Rugby stadium, owned and operated by the Scottish Rugby Union (SRU), to the adjoining Roseburn Park.

The Wanderers were to lose their clubhouse (they depend on its income to help fund outreach activities) and they wanted to build a new one – two-storeys, with bar – in Roseburn Park. Residents were up in arms at the likely impact and were not prepared to accommodate the Wanderers plans.

The Wanderers have been based, in one form or another, on the back pitches, for almost a century, since 1928. On Friday the 31st August they will have to leave, ending a relationship with the SRU going back to 1902.

The SRU is not popular with the residents of Roseburn. The flood plain on which their homes are built used to flood regularly from the Water of Leith and the 2004 permission to take forward the flood defences scheme was thwarted when the SRU objected. They wanted their back pitches protected as well, which Edinburgh Council argued would reduce the size of the flood plain. The SRU won, and the delay meant funding windows were missed; the work on the £23M scheme only concluded in January 2018. The Scottish Government's accommodation of the SRU's demand, to have their amateur training grassy pitches protected, astonished and angered the community, the impact being that the 1.5 Km of floodwalls had to be 25cm higher, thereby obscuring resident's and visitor's views of the river and park right across the area.

The SRU's plans were not really to protect the back pitches for amateur rugby at all, but to realise its own commercial ambitions. When the Wanderers asked for the 25-year lease to be extended in 2010 (it still had 7 years to run), the SRU indicated there was trouble ahead. The Wanderers were dumbfounded – when they were originally invited to build their clubhouse on the back pitches back in 1992, they'd sunk £300,000 into its construction, having been encouraged by the SRU to sell their old clubhouse on the nearby Corstorphine Road.

At the time the SRU were strapped for cash and unable to access Scottish Sport Council [the precursor to SportScotland] cash without being able to evidence community benefit. The Wanderers, one of the few teams in Edinburgh to open to all-comers, was perfect for getting them the money they needed. With the promise that it would be used for public benefit, the SRU were given grants totalling £290,000 of taxpayer's cash, which was partnered by £510,000 from the Foundation of Sports and Arts.

The Wanderers did not own the land on which they built their clubhouse in 1993, but for funding purposes were told they needed a lease. This was the first ever lease in their 91-year relationship and the SRU gave the impression at the time that the lease would be renewed in perpetuity. [More info in [The Offside Line 30/7/18](#)]. The SRU, though, having got the government grants, began to lose interest in grass-roots work, choosing to focus on making money instead.

Since 2010, the Wanderers have endeavoured to find an alternative home, but having settled upon Roseburn Park in 2016, they did not anticipate objections from existing park users. They therefore sought to get a few more years added onto the lease and eventually the SRU grudgingly agreed a one-year extension, to 31st August 2018.

The extension cost the SRU little though; as soon as the floodworks were completed, they showed their hand by lodging a planning application for an 8,000 seat capacity mini-stadium on half of the back pitches, to be home to their Edinburgh Rugby professional team.

There had been trouble brewing behind the scenes at the SRU, as those interested in making a buck disposed of those who felt differently. In May 2016 the SRU Chief Exec, Mark Dodson, sacked Keith Russell, the former SRU director of domestic rugby and father of Scotland fly-half Finn. Russell subsequently won an unfair dismissal case before lifting the lid on the “toxic” culture of an organisation run by an autocratic and intemperate leader. The figure of quarter of a million pounds is attached to the sorry affair. As the Times of 4/8/18 noted, “Russell’s testimony revealed that the powers within Murrayfield have a disdain for the game’s grass roots and democratic processes that borders on contempt.” Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) have become the norm, dissuading departing staff from exposing SRU workings. Recent actions undermine the status of the SRU as the governing body of Scotland’s clubs, there to serve the needs of its members.

After reflecting on John McLellan’s piece (“[The SRU is no friend of Grassroots Rugby](#)”, Scotsman, 28/7/18), local activist Pete Gregson, who campaigns as “Kids not Suits”, and who also serves at the Chair of the Friends of Roseburn Park, felt it was time to take the SRU to task.

Initially, he wrote to his local MSP, Ruth Davidson, leader of the Scottish Conservatives, asking that she intervene with the SRU over his allegations of fraud and theft. Seeing little action, he then wrote to MSPs Kezia Dugdale (Labour) and Andy Wightman (Green) too, since through the Scottish PR system, all are empowered to deal with his concerns. He felt the scandal was big enough to involve all the Parties. He felt that if they acted speedily, they may yet save the Wanderers from being evicted in a few days’ time.

He alleges “fraud in the misuse of public funding from Sportscotland to the tune of £290,000 in grants that the SRU received, to develop their back pitches for grassroots rugby. They are now evicting the Wanderers amateur rugby club in order to build a mini-stadium on the land. This was funding for public benefit, not SRU financial gain. By turfing this popular club off its land, they are taking advantage of tax-payers cash that was meant for the use of the wider community.”

He also alleges “theft over the appropriation of the Wanderer’s clubhouse, in which this club invested £300,000 in building 25 years ago, worth almost £500,000 in today’s money. The SRU have paid £50,000 compensation, which amounts to robbery” in his eyes.

He points out that residents believe (like Wanderers fans and the Lord Provost and SNP ward Councillor, Frank Ross) that there is no reason why the SRU can’t continue to let the Wanderers share with Edinburgh Rugby, use their clubhouse and continue practising at Murrayfield. The Wanderers paid for it, after all – as did we, through our taxes. And the SRU’s Director of Edinburgh Rugby, Johnny Petrie, said that Edinburgh Rugby had no plans to use it. [although the above press reports claim otherwise]

Mr Gregson said “We appeal to our politicians to intervene to stop the SRU behaving in a cavalier and arrogant fashion. They must cease in their unkind treatment of those amateurs playing a sport the SRU claims to support, while believing that the community should pick up the pieces. Enough! “

Kezia has agreed to write to the SRU’s Chief Operating Officer, Dominic McKay; whilst Ruth has offered to meet Pete (11 days after he’d originally contacted her and only because he kept phoning!). Readers who want to stay abreast of developments, such as the FOI request to Sportscotland alerting them to a likely breach of SRU’s grant condition, can visit www.kidsnotsuits.com/sru