



Greyhound racing in peril as Khan backs AFC Wimbledon plans

Last dog track in the capital is facing extinction as mayor agrees football stadium should be built at Plough Lane site

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The last greyhound track in London is facing extinction after the mayor, Sadiq Khan, agreed the site should be used for a new stadium for the football club AFC Wimbledon.

Plans for the Plough Lane development outline a 20,000-seat stadium, 602 homes and a leisure centre, which would be “of great benefit to Londoners and the wider community for generations to come”.

It would bring the League One side back to Merton in south-west London from its current capacity ground in Kingston-upon-Thames, which has a capacity of about 5,000. The club has been there after being established in the ninth tier of English football in 2002.

But the move would erase the last arena for greyhound racing in the capital and quicken the decline of an already ailing sport, campaigners say.

Tracks in Wembley, West Ham, Clapton and Hackney have all disappeared and when Walthamstow shut in 2008, Wimbledon was the only place left for race-goers.

The growing pressure from AFC Wimbledon for a bigger stadium comes as they climb the ranks of English football, having been promoted six times in 13 seasons.

The original Wimbledon FC was founded in 1889 and played at Plough Lane from 1912 to 1991, famously winning the FA Cup final against Liverpool in 1988.

Fans set up the new club after Wimbledon FC, who had been ground-sharing for years with Crystal Palace, were told in 2002 they would have to move 80 miles north to Milton Keynes and rebrand as MK Dons, following a requirement to have all-seater stadiums.



Kingsmeadow stadium in Kingston-upon-Thames, AFC Wimbledon's current ground.
Photograph: Scunthorpe FC/Rex/Shutterstock

Khan's intervention overturns a decision by his predecessor Boris Johnson who had granted the track a reprieve following Merton council's decision to press ahead with the Galliard Homes development in December 2015.

After greyhound racing came to Britain in 1926, audiences peaked at about 50 million in 1945. By 1960, it was estimated at 16 million, in 1993 4 million, dropping to 2 million in 2013, according to reports.

The sport's public image was tarnished in 2006 following newspaper stories about the mass euthanasia of dogs deemed too old or lame to race. The exposé caused outrage and led to procedures being established for the better care of former race dogs, but racing has not recovered from the bad publicity. Reports show the number of tickets sold in Britain annually dropped by 58% between 2000 and 2012.

Khan said: "I have taken the time to consult local residents, businesses and other interested parties. Having weighed up all of the evidence available to me I'm confident the stadium and the leisure facility proposed alongside it will be of great benefit to Londoners and the wider community for generations to come.

"As such, I have decided to return the application to the local council to determine itself."

Stephen Alambritis, the leader of Merton council, said: "I am absolutely thrilled with the mayor's decision to hand the decision back to us and we look forward to the homecoming of this much-loved and well-deserving team. Merton wants to see AFC Wimbledon back on Wimbledon turf.

"The club has been very patient throughout the process and now the dream of players and fans alike, many of whom are local, is set to become reality."

Merton council planning committee meets on 15 September.

A council spokeswoman said: "It will be a meeting to progress on to the next stage. It will formally uphold the application and the scheme will go ahead."