

Somewhere to play

Since Victorian times the Freemantle and Shirley fields in Southampton have been used by locals to play sport and socialise. Although the grounds have become neglected, Cevn Vibert is confident that the area can be turned back into a community hub.

We have a dream, which is something we often say to each other and have a laugh. We want the Freemantle and Shirley fields to become a place where local people can meet, play sport and socialise. We're trying to get people off their backsides, away from the telly and out mingling with each other to form community bonds, something which is just dying these days.

This is one of the last Victorian playing fields in Southampton. The Civil Service looked after the ground for many years but six years ago they stopped investing in it and it went to rack and ruin.

We've been campaigning to save the field for about 19 months. Over a hundred people attended a public meeting saying they wanted access to the land, for it to be cleaned up and have improved security. They also wanted a replacement for the pavilion which used to be on the fields, and was a great place for families to get together.

The land was recently bought by developers who are in discussions with planners to let them build housing on the site. As soon as we heard that the land was going to tender we lobbied the council into making the grounds a greenfield site.

We met with the developers and found them to be very amenable and straightforward. If you start off in a friendly, open, businesslike way, you don't have to be abrasive. It's better to keep your machismo outside the room. They just said we're a housing builder and we want to put homes on the site. They realise they're up against it in planning terms, because of the green field status.

The area is quite big, about the size of two football pitches. At the moment it is pretty vandalised. We have a slide show with pictures of car engines and debris from drugs and local prostitutes on the field. We've also got aerial pictures showing thousands of houses surrounding one pocket of green. Our slogan is – 'where else are 25,000 people going to play?'