

Landlords write-off Hamlet's debt

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Controversial landlords who locked the country's fastest-growing football club out of their ground have performed a U-turn by writing off the club's purported £750,000 debts.

Meadow Residential, developers who bought the club in 2014, insist town hall leaders now let it to build 224 flats on Dulwich Hamlet's Champion Hill pitch plus a new home for the club next door.

MR wrote to the newly-promoted Hamlet's board on July 9 to say it would not pursue them for the money it is owed in rent for the stadium.

One letter from MR subsidiary Champion Hill Limited (CHL) said: "In light of the continuing financial difficulties faced by Dulwich Hamlet Limited a decision has been taken by us to waive those debts. We hereby confirm that we will take no action to collect monies owed it by Dulwich Hamlet Limited."

Another letter from Healey Development Solutions (Dulwich) Limited said: "In light of the financial difficulties faced by Dulwich Hamlet Limited, we have taken the decision not to pursue the debts owed to it in the sum of £154,997.74. This letter is a waiver of that debt and confirmation that no further action will be taken by us."

The company is now demanding Southwark council approve its hugely intensified scheme – its original application was for just 151 flats – which moves the club to a decaying astro turf pitch on next door Greendale Playing Fields.

The firm also claims its revised new plans comply with planning policies and it has had positive meetings with the Greater London Authority over the project.

It now wants a pre-application meeting with Southwark council to determine whether it is likely to get planning permission. Its directors say they have asked for sports minister Tracey Crouch to mediate the dispute with the town hall, though she tweeted on July 6: "Need to have request from both parties for mediator. At the moment they are saying they don't need it. I am trying to unlock the ground for season but that is proving difficult. Ultimately this is a planning dispute with club as victim." That tweet sparked MR partner Andrew McDaniel to stress to her he is available for mediation.

A spokesman for MR said of Southwark leader Cllr Peter John: "He is now the main roadblock to progress.

"The only way the club can return to Champion Hill is by giving it the astro turf pitch so that planning can proceed. Or the council buys Champion Hill recognising its residential value.

"A lot of work has gone into making our plans policy compliant. We are writing off the club's debts while there is a window before the start of the football season, so the club knows where it is. We have engaged with the government and the GLA and offered mediation. It is now time for the council to respond.

"Southwark's threat of a compulsory purchase order on Champion Hill is making it harder for the club to return there."



Dulwich Hamlet celebrating promotion in May

Hamlet chairman Liam Hickey said: "Everything MR do is born of self-interest. All the purported debts in the club's accounts is being looked at by our legal advisors."

Southwark council's Cllr Johnson Situ said: "Southwark council made a good offer to Meadow in March to buy the Champion Hill site and secure the future of Dulwich Hamlet Football Club. Meadow have not even acknowledged our offer. Their ongoing refusal to engage with the council is the issue here – the ball is with them. The council is on the side of DHFC and has been all along – we are open to any discussions that will find a long term solution for the club. Maybe Meadow should focus on baseball and leave football to those who

treasure it. Sadly football's not coming home this year, but there is no good reason why Dulwich Hamlet FC can't."

The company's original 151-flat scheme for the area had a new stadium for Hamlet on a next door astro turf training pitch, but the plan encroached 10m into Greendale Playing Fields.

This idea of building there was rejected by a public inquiry headed by a government inspector 18 years ago, because Greendale is Metropolitan Open Land and therefore sacrosanct.

The original scheme could have made MR up to £50million at current property values. Hamlet fans voted by 94 per cent to agree to the scheme two years ago, but the two sides fell

out when Southwark council stalled over agreeing planning permission. MR pulled the plug on player wages in November and then claimed the rights to the club's name and crest in March.

Hamlet, who celebrated their 125th anniversary that month, were locked out of Champion Hill days later. They played the rest of their home games at the home of local rivals Tooting & Mitcham United – Imperial Fields, in Bishopsford Road, Mitcham, seven miles away from their home of more than 70 years.

The furore over the development plans and the trademarks did not affect Gavin Rose's team – they won promotion to National League South at the third attempt with a play-off victory on penalties over Hendon on May 7.

● Dulwich Hamlet can now hugely expand its size with a share issue.

An annual general meeting on June 27 voted in favour of offering new stakes in the company, allowing fans to own their own piece of the 125-year-old club.

The share capital in the firm which owns Hamlet has been increased in size from £300,000 to £1.5million, allowing it to vastly increase the investment it holds.

Blocks of a minimum of £500 worth of shares are now available – though bigger investors are already thought to be discussing buying a large stake in the company.

Chairman Liam Hickey confirmed: "The new shares aim to attract investment.

"They are available for fans to buy in blocks of £500 minimum."