

A considered response from the community

This is a response to the Consultation Document on the proposal to convert two Squash Courts at Bramhall Leisure Centre into a single space to be used for Dance and Drama. It brings together the thoughts and ideas from a wide range of members of the Local Community

Squash Courts are purpose-built, unique and precious spaces. Once a Squash Court is ‘converted’ into a multi-use space, it is extremely expensive to convert it back to a Squash facility, which often means that no-one will ever play Squash there again. In contrast, you can Dance or participate in Drama in almost any multi-use space, of which there is currently more than enough availability at Bramhall Leisure Centre. In the last couple of years, at least six of the Local Authority owned Squash Courts in the locality have, one by one, been converted – possibly with the best of motives – to provide accommodation for other activities which have turned out to be short-lived fads or which now have less support than before. These Courts have been lost to the community forever. Squash Courts have one of the highest use ratios of all community facilities. Closing those at Bramhall will leave just two alternative sites in the locality. The Government and Local Authority are encouraging society to exercise more in order to improve our health and life expectancy. Completely at variance with this essential and laudable policy, the School’s Governing Body is proposing to permanently close consistently well-used community sporting facilities without producing any concrete or compelling evidence for doing so.

As well as looking after the needs of its children, Bramhall High School has (as stated in its vision) ***“a requirement to act responsibly towards the wider community”***.

Here are some responses from the local community to many of the statements made in the consultation documents issued by the Headteacher, Mr Peckham.

We also provide proposals that we hope might help to resolve the situation.

SAVE OUR SQUASH

Some community users of Bramhall Squash Courts pictured in the Stockport Express



MR PECKHAM SAYS *“There is considerable demand for good quality dance / drama type facilities”*

THE TRUTH IS There is absolutely no evidence given for this assertion upon which respondents are supposed to make their judgement. The reality is quite to the contrary, as we have quickly found out. Here are the facts.

For a start, there are already good quality and comprehensive facilities at Bramhall for Dance and Drama (in the Gym, the Refectory and the Drama Workshop). These resources are currently available to the wider community for about 127 hours per week in the evenings and at weekends, but the public simply does not want to use them (16.5 hours per week – which is a 13% usage rate).



We have discovered that in the past few years the Centre has actively promoted, or has been used for: *Dance for Young People, Pilates, Slide Aerobics, Step Aerobics, Boxercise, Slimming Classes, Summer Holiday Dance Classes, Tap Dancing, Salsa Classes and Ballroom Dancing.* The Bramhall School of Dance has also used the existing facilities for two projects. All of these ventures have sadly failed due to lack of demand.

We also discovered fifteen Dance Schools in the catchment area (and think there are probably many more) which could use the facilities at the Centre and not one of which chooses to do so.

From this we conclude that there is clearly **no considerable demand** in the wider community for any additional good quality facilities for Dance or Drama.

MR PECKHAM SAYS *“The facilities could be used as a general fitness studio or rehearsal room”*

THE TRUTH IS We have been here before. In the past handful of years, and possibly with the best of intentions, a total of six public Squash Courts have been closed down at Cheadle, Romiley and Stockport Centre. The Courts have been converted (in most cases at considerable expense) into Fitness Studios or for use for other activities which have turned out to be short-lived fads. These courts have been lost to the community forever, and furthermore there is no community spirit or interactivity shown by their current users today (we know because some of us use them).



Any requirement for a Rehearsal Room at Bramhall Leisure Centre can be met many times by its current resources in terms of space and availability. The Centre has a huge over-capacity of 110 hours per week (see *Appendix on Usage*) that can currently accommodate Dance or Drama activities with its existing resources in the Gym, the Refectory and the Drama Workshop. Local Dance and Aerobic Studios at Hazel Grove and Priestnall Centres are also running under capacity.

The Squash Courts at Bramhall are used 52 weeks a year and have one of the highest use ratios of all community or sport facilities in the locality. They are in almost constant use by the Local Community each evening and part of the weekends of each week of the year – even at Christmas. The School would only use the Dance facilities for thirty-three weeks of the academic year at most.



MR PECKHAM SAYS “Dance is at present taught in the Refectory”

THE TRUTH IS The refectory is only one part of the equation. We understand that Dance is also taught in the Sports Hall, the Squash Courts and the Gymnasium.

To say that Dance is only taught in the Refectory is a misrepresentation of the current situation, leading respondents to the Consultation Document to falsely assume it to be much worse than it is in reality.

MR PECKHAM SAYS “The courts are currently only used from 5:30 pm to 10:30 pm Monday to Thursday with some use at the weekend”

THE TRUTH IS The Courts are in use every day of the week, but in line with current regulations, the Local Community is limited to using Bramhall Leisure Centre Squash Courts between the hours of 5:30 pm and 10:30 pm. We are sure if the Local Community were given access to play during the day, then many would choose to do so, including mothers, fathers and children at home for whatever reason. This wider access practice is in now place at Priestnall.

Every Friday night, in particular, the courts are fully used by groups of players who use this time to keep fit and for social interaction. Both courts are used from early evening until closing time. This thriving social squash has been going on for many years and has been organised by the regular users who use the centre not only as a sporting venue, but also as a social centre where they meet up with other users who play other sports.

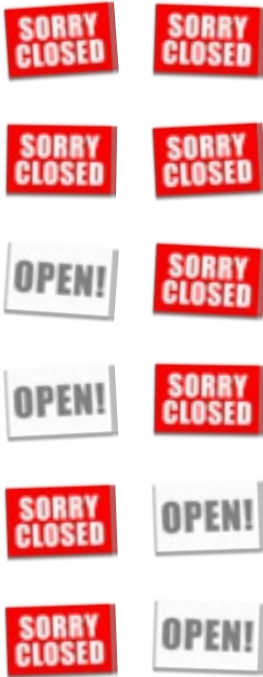
As well as social squash, some regular players run their own competitive Leagues, which have about thirty-five members. These regular players also organise two Competitions a year – which are very popular – and have competed against teams raised from other Leisure Centres. Note that it is not possible to play Tournament Squash at Hazel Grove, because the courts are completely enclosed, without balconies. There are many others who play regularly, but in a less structured way.

We have identified **over 90 players who currently use the courts on a regular basis at least once a week**, and whose names are given in the *Appendix on Usage*. This is in the quieter summer period. During the winter period the number of regular users increases substantially.



MR PECKHAM SAYS *“Across the Borough I am advised that there are sufficient Squash Courts to meet current demand”*

THE TRUTH IS The Squash Courts owned by the Local Authority can only be found at three Leisure Centres in the vicinity, including Bramhall. The Courts at these Centres struggle to meet the current demands placed on them. The Courts at the three Leisure Centres are well used and it is our experience that it is extremely difficult to book courts at these Centres because of the high demand.



The loss to the Local Community of the two courts from Bramhall will mean an immediate reduction in local provision of 33.3%. This means that the twelve courts that were available to the public only a few years ago will be reduced to just four. That is a significant loss of public amenities that will never be replaced and a loss of options for members of the community.

It will result in less players from the Local Community being able to participate in their chosen sport, and a loss of revenue to the Sports Trust which administers the Leisure Centres. We estimate that **the revenue from the let of Squash Courts at Bramhall alone brings in about £9,500 per annum** to the Centre from approximately 4,000 Customer Visits. Add to this the revenue from the bar and the vending machine, and we estimate a total *circa* £19,000 *pa*.

The Sports Trust would also lose revenue from reduced rental. Two Squash Courts can generate £15 an hour. The Drama Studio (which is almost the same size as the two Squash Courts) is currently charged at £7.50 per hour.

Furthermore, the Leisure Centre employs a number of local people, and to close the Squash facilities in Bramhall may jeopardise these jobs. The opportunities for part-time employment in Bramhall, in particular at evening times, are very limited.

The loss of the Squash facilities would also impact on the viability of the bar, due to the substantial fall-off in trade. This in turn could have an affect on the local children who use the Centre at weekends for Birthday Parties and other Social Events.

FURTHER LOSS OF REVENUE

Two Squash Courts can generate £15 an hour. The Drama Studio (which is the same size) is charged at £7.50 per hour. The Drama Studio is hardly ever used for Drama by the Community.

£4million boost for leisure centre revamp



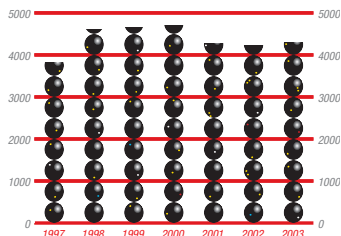
STOP PRESS
This “£4 million boost” at Wilmslow involved the conversion of Squash Courts into Office Space

“They railroaded us. If they carry on closing Squash Courts at this rate, it’s going to kill the game completely. Don’t they know Squash is a Priority Sport?”

MR PECKHAM SAYS “Demand for Squash is declining”

THE TRUTH IS Demand for **all** grassroots sport is declining. However, **demand for Squash at Bramhall Leisure Centre has remained constant over the last few years** as the figures provided by the Sports Trust demonstrate (See *Appendix on Usage*). It certainly has certainly not changed in line with unattributed “national demographic movements”.

SQUASH DEMAND AT BRAMHALL



Demand is almost constant at Bramhall, see Appendix on Use

GOVERNMENT IDENTIFIES SQUASH AS A PRIORITY SPORT



England Sport (who deliver the Government’s Sporting Objectives) have identified Squash as one of its ten Priority Sports to receive funding, grant aid and promotion throughout the country

NORTH WEST PLAN FOR SPORT 2004–2008

It is strongly acknowledged that sport has a major role to play in positively effecting quality of life. The Regional Plan will be structured against: Enhancing the Sporting infrastructure, Improving Health and well-being, Improving Education, Benefiting the Community and Creating Stronger and Safer Communities

The Government together with Sport England are encouraging the general population to exercise more for the benefit of the health of the Nation in general, to improve quality of life, and to prevent long-term illnesses such as diabetes, heart attacks and other heart-related illnesses, and to counter obesity. At least two regular players suffer from diabetes and use the facilities at Bramhall Leisure Centre to control and manage their condition. The withdrawal of this facility would have a major effect upon their health.

Stockport MBC has in the past encouraged the community to use sport at their Leisure Centres to keep fit in body and mind. Squash is a particularly well-liked physical activity and is a major asset in tackling the long term strategic issues of active lifestyles, lifelong participation and general health of the general population.

It is a credit to the quality of provision at Bramhall that Squash bookings are maintaining their high level of demand. (Compare the usage rates of the ten Tennis Courts to those of Squash). People like playing Squash at Bramhall, because it does not have the anodyne atmosphere found in many private sports club, which have a much less broad appeal.

Players at Bramhall socialise with other regular attendees who participate in their chosen activities such as Fencing, Badminton, TableTennis, Kendo and Five-a-Side. This is a mixed and well-established community of users who know if they do not fully support public facilities such as these, they will wither and a vital, broad and mixed resource such as this would be lost to the community forever.

Unlike Squash in Bramhall, school numbers are declining dramatically with a projected 35% surplus of places by 2008. Bramhall High School is no exception in that the intake is already declining, and is likely to continue due to the closure of a number of local Junior Schools caused by the current demographic changes.

MR PECKHAM SAYS *“A Dance / Drama facility would provide greater community use for a wider range of users than the Squash Courts”*

THE TRUTH IS There are no statistics to support this statement. Bramhall Leisure Centre is currently used on a regular basis by the Cheerleader and Drama groups *Rising Stars*, *Youth Unlimited* and *Marval*, yet it still has a huge over-capacity of 110 hours per week (see *Appendix on Usage*). We would argue that **the current space more than adequately provides for the current usage** and that any further demand (if it exists at all) could be easily met entirely within the current provision.

If, in the unlikely event that there is unprecedented demand for additional Dance and Drama space, then we have put forward alternative suggestions to accommodate this – and which would incidentally benefit both the School and the Local Community. These ideas are on page 11 of this document.

The evidence that we outline on page 2 of the failure of twelve Dance-oriented ventures in the last two years demonstrates that there is clearly little demand in the Local Community for further Dance activities and we have not found as yet any evidence of any demand for Drama other than *Youth Unlimited* and *Marval*, who already occupy the Centre.

Maybe this is because there is already considerable choice and provision in the locality for those who wish to participate in these activities. Not only is there huge and varied capacity in the local Leisure Centres, there is also alternative and excellent provision within a few hundred metres of the School. The Brookdale Centre, the Scout Hut and the Ladybridge pub all have excellent resources that can be used and have been used for Dance or Drama. Add to this suitable spaces within Church complexes and Community Halls and the idea that **“a Dance or Drama facility would provide greater community use than the Squash Courts”** just does not stand up to scrutiny.

On the other hand, to find alternative public Squash facilities, the Community is faced only with the choice of courts at Cheadle Hulme or Hazel Grove. Both of these sites are already heavily used, and there is no Public Transport connection from Bramhall to either of the locations. A number of players currently either walk to Bramhall Leisure Centre, or are dependent upon Public Transport.

The Courts at Bramhall are currently supported by different types of members of the community, not just men, but also parents who bring their children in to learn the game, mixed couples who play for a short burst of convivial exercise, and many young people (including the local Scouts) who want to learn the sport.

In fact, we have identified over 90 regulars who are currently using the Courts at least once a week. This is in the quieter summer period. During the winter period the number of regular users increases substantially. The names of these players are given in the *Appendix on Usage*.

SPORT IN THE COMMUNITY

Investing in Sport is not just a Sports Policy – It's a Health Policy, an Education Policy, an Anti-Crime Policy and an Anti-Drugs Policy

The Prime Minister

MR PECKHAM SAYS *“An opportunity to make any representations to the Governing Body”*

THE TRUTH IS The School refused to provide current contact information of the Governing Body to every Squash playing member of the Community who requested it. These people (who either have or had children at the School) asked for the information so that they could be able to make adequate representations. The School has not made the correct opportunities for members of the Community to make adequate representations. This is contrary to the published aims of the school. The school is committed to **valuing everyone equally, celebrating diversity, and encouraging students towards responsible, democratic participation in society and the Local Community.**

We note that there were also at least two consultation documents which put forward different stories to different people which could skew the consultation process in favour of the School in an undemocratic manner. In particular the document sent to parents of students of the school was, as we have shown, biased, untrue, and appears to be designed to lead people to draw the wrong conclusion.

MR PECKHAM SAYS *“We wish to offer the regular users of the squash courts a small contribution”*

THE TRUTH IS We are concerned that in the past the School has sought funding from parents to support its activities due to lack of funds. The offer to current regular users of the Leisure Centre of £150 to support the School’s proposition would cost Bramhall High School a conservatively estimated £7,000. Our most recent investigations show that it could be a considerable amount more (See the *Appendix on Usage* where over 90 regular players are identified).



We are confident that the School could use the money to provide alternative Dance facilities without having to close the Squash Courts, and without disenfranchising a large section of the Local Community.

Squash players want to keep the Squash Courts open for the wider benefit of the Local Community, want to support Local Employment, and want to work with Bramhall High School in looking at ways in which they could adapt or develop current provision to meet their needs.

We are not interested in a bribe of £150.

MR PECKHAM SAYS “towards the cost of seeking alternative provision”

THE TRUTH IS Regular players do not want to join a Private Squash Club. We would like to continue to play our sport in the Community, supporting and perhaps coaching the younger generation of players.

The players who use Bramhall wish to support the Local Authority's provision (and continued Local Employment). This is a mixed and well-established community of users who know that if they do not fully support public facilities such as these the facilities will slowly wither and a vital, broad and mixed resource such as that at Bramhall would be lost to the community forever.

But more importantly, the Leisure Centre is more than a sports facility – it is also a strong social facility. Over many years, people have used the Centre with a great deal of regularity and commitment, and the different groups and clubs (Badminton, Fencing, TableTennis for example) tend to meet up together after playing their sport and socialise. We do not want to lose that social interaction. It is an important benefit that the local community would not get at a private sports club.



SAVE OUR SQUASH


“We don't want to join a private club,” said one Squash Player from Bramhall Leisure Centre in the Stockport Express, “If you go to a private club you put your money in a machine, play your game and go home. We integrate with other users of the Centre. The whole point is the social side, the craic.”

FEASIBILITY COST OF CONVERSION

We have not had access to all the facts, but we have been advised by a structural engineer that removing the high supporting wall that divides the two courts and also supports the roof trusses, creating, installing and bedding in new steelwork to support the enlarged roof span is neither a trivial exercise, nor is it cheap. We expect to see costs in the region of £50,000 to £60,000.

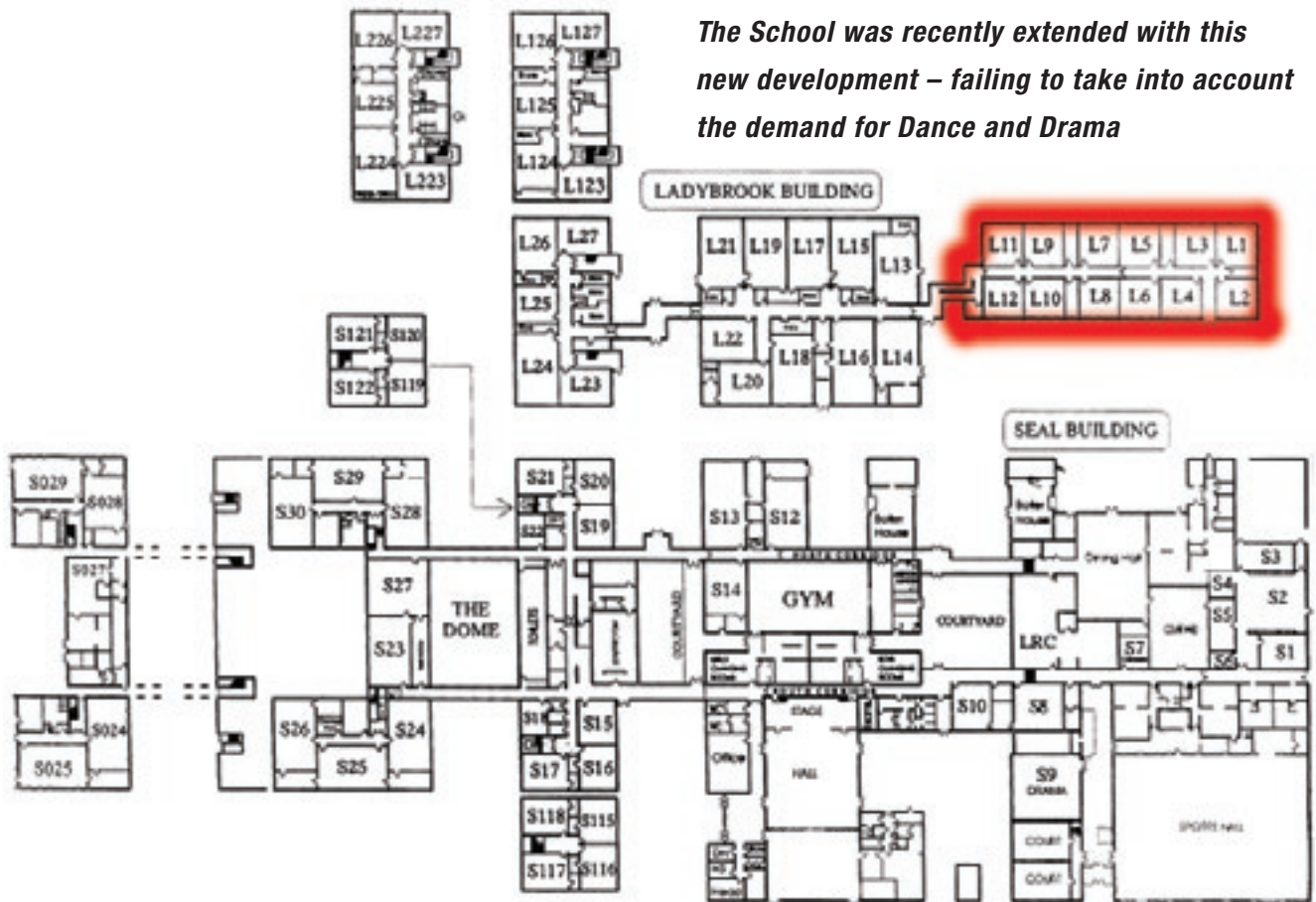
There would also be a great deal of wasted investment. In the last six months, the courts were closed for six weeks while they underwent extensive remedial work, including the installation of new electrical supplies and electronic control systems, which is all in addition to the provision of new heating a few months before the most recent works. The proposed ‘conversion’ process will destroy all this remedial work as well as the expensive floors, which are at the moment perfect for both Dancing on – and for playing Squash.

Because the Courts are at the entrance, the Centre would also have to be closed during the proposed conversion works, which would have a wider deleterious impact on Local Community access and would reduce revenue for the Sports Trust even more.

If the need for this type a facility is “core” to Student Education, surely the school could access Government Funding to improve and expand facilities without reducing Community use. 

EXISTING OPTIONS

We are surprised that provision was not made for the needs of Dance and Drama when the school was recently extended with its new development adjacent to the Ladybridge Buildings. Constructing a number of buildings as one project is cheaper than doing things in a piecemeal fashion.



The School was recently extended with this new development – failing to take into account the demand for Dance and Drama

LACK OF FORESIGHT

Provision was not made for the needs of Dance and Drama when the School was recently extended with its new development – WHY?

The school itself is large, complex, and is rich in extensive facilities and bristling with alternative possibilities. As well as access to all the spaces jointly managed by the Sports Trust on behalf of the Community, there are many obviously suitable internal spaces in the Seal Building such as the Refectory, the Gymnasium and the Hall (which already has a built-in divider to produce an ideal sized space).

However, various reasons have been given verbally (none of which have been backed up with any evidence) for the unsuitability of all of these resources as well as many other additional smaller spaces.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVES

What the school does have, however, are spaces that could be developed (possibly more cheaply than the rebuilding the Squash Courts), and that could be constructed to restrict the noise pollution that would emanate from a Dance or Drama Studio. **Many attractive alternatives immediately spring to mind.**

For example, any one of five large courtyards shown below could be used to create a space of the right size, and which are much closer to the changing rooms than the Squash Courts. A courtyard could be covered completely with a light transmitting roof for a relatively small investment and transformed into a magnificent multi-use space. This could be done either by using the existing structure of the building, or by using new support walls that would accommodate existing patterns of movement and would insulate against possible noise pollution.



FIVE EXISTING ALTERNATIVES

We show at least five alternatives within the existing layout of the School that offer better and more convenient potential for Dance and Drama than the destruction of the Squash Courts

Courtyard 1 (165 m² usable area) is adjacent to the girls' changing rooms and room S14. The large central courtyard would be a fantastic space (and not just for Dance and Drama).

Courtyard 2 (182 m² usable area) would also provide another great multi-use space, even allowing for a circulation route between the north and south corridors and access from the changing rooms to the sports fields.

Another, and possibly better, option would be **Courtyard 3** (145 m²) adjacent to the Refectory and rooms S4, S5 and S6. Its perimeter is part-covered and there is seating open to the elements in the central area at the moment, which cannot be used for more than a few hours in a few weeks in the year.

The existing paving and ground surfaces of these courtyards are poor, and in one case the paving is quite dangerous and is in need of immediate renovation.

Spaces 4 and 5 also offer other exciting possibilities at the right size that could be developed at reasonable cost. **Space 5** (165 m²) already has supporting walls which almost completely surround the area.

A BENEFIT TO BOTH THE SCHOOL AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

BUILDING ON GOOD PRACTICE

When the School recently covered the large open space next to the unisex toilets to create the 'Dome', Mr Peckham praised the new structure, saying, "for a relatively small investment we have turned a dismal area... into a new space". Other teachers added, "an absolute godsend," and, "a million times better than last year"



A new Courtyard 3 – looking towards the Serving Hatch

But, quite possibly the best option would be to convert courtyard **3** (which is adjacent to the kitchens and the existing serving hatch) into a new Refectory. That would free the existing Refectory (with its excellent floor) for use as a new multi-use open space. An inexpensive freestanding roof structure over this courtyard would provide excellent light and wonderful sense of space.

Although a structure like this would cost in the region of £20,000, it may not satisfy L2 Building Regulations. We are investigating pressed metal and timber framed alternatives.

Work could be carried out rapidly, and would not disrupt the working of the Leisure Centre, so they would not suffer any lost revenue.

What a great use of space that would be. Nothing would be lost, and a great deal would be gained. ***It would be a real benefit both to the School and to the Local Community.***

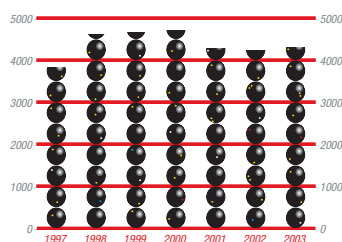


Courtyard 3 – looking towards the Leisure Centre

APPENDIX ON USAGE

SQUASH DEMAND *The demand for Squash at Bramhall has remained remarkably*

consistent over the last six years. Here are the actual attendance figures provided by the Sports Trust.



*The figure for 2003 has been adjusted to compensate for the six weeks closure of the Courts for renovations. The recorded figure for 46 weeks in 2003 is 3,802.

These figures represent a dependable income to the Sports Trust of between £9,000 and £10,000 *per annum*.

The floor area of each Squash Court is 63 square metres. The two Courts and the balcony area total 157 square metres.

REGULAR PLAYERS

Over 90 regulars currently play Squash one or more times a week. The players listed regularly book a Court on behalf of themselves and other players. Where multiple Courts are booked, the minimum number of players involved is noted in brackets after the player's name. This is in the quieter summer period. During the winter period the number of regular users increases substantially.



- Roughsedge • McDowell [4] • Bottomley [4] • Hallows • Spencer • Rafter • Millar
- Huchinson • Mulvey • Smith • Hampson [4] • Strong • Atkins • Williams • Bryden
- Dean • Damien • Richard • Davis • Farrand • Fleet • Jed • McAndrew • Steve
- Shaun • Mark [4] • Olive • Moulds [4] • Lawrence • Taylor • Coates • O'Reilly
- Shaw • Hatchett • Jones • Ford • Platt • Kerrigan • Chorlton • Normanshire
- Vaughan • Briggs • Duffy • Latham • Martin • Graham • Chung • Eccleston
- Suki • Qureshi • Daniels • Weids • Eagle • Tonge • Danny • Seaton • Josh
- Hornsby • Chappelle • Eagle • Morse • Duffy • Robinson • Woods • Graham
- Martin • McPartland • Russell • Coates • Wilson • Vernon • Metcalf • Chorlton
- Masterman • Middleton

DANCE & DRAMA

Rising Stars regularly book two sessions totalling 9 hours per week, *Youth Unlimited* take 4 hours and *Marval* book 2.5 hours. This is a total regular uptake of 16.5 hours from the Community. On one occasion, a single hour was booked for Aerobics. There is a total of 127 hours currently available in the Drama Workshop, the Refectory and the Gym alone, with an overcapacity of 110 hours.

The floor area of the Gym (250 m²), the Refectory (225 m²) and the Drama Workshop (125 m²) total 600 square metres.

In the past few years the Centre has actively promoted, or has been used for: *Dance for Young People, Pilates, Slide Aerobics, Step Aerobics, Boxercise, Slimming Classes, Summer Holiday Dance Classes, Tap, Salsa and Ballroom Dancing.* The Bramhall School of Dance has also used the existing facilities for two projects. All these ventures failed due to lack of demand in the Local Community

