EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
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19th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

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Local football feel the blues from Chelsea FC

7 August 2024



The **Epsom and Ewell Colts**, a longstanding community-led grassroots football club, are facing a crisis after the abrupt cancellation of their primary training venue at Blenheim High School. The school's decision to make way for the Chelsea FC Foundation has impacted 170 girls from the under-8s team and upwards, leaving them without a place to train or play.

Founded in 1971, the Epsom and Ewell Colts have been a cornerstone of the local community, providing young people with opportunities to develop teamwork skills and forge lifelong friendships. Community football offers far more than the possibility of turning professional or enhancing physical fitness and skills. It strengthens community bonds, offering young people a productive outlet that teaches important life lessons and steers them away from negative influences. Players, coaches, volunteers, and supporters collaborate towards common goals, fostering mutual respect and understanding. This inclusive environment breaks down social barriers and contributes to the community as a more welcoming and integrated place for all.

With the Epsom and Ewell Colts now displaced from their core training ground at Blenheim High School, both players and parents are left feeling disappointed and concerned for the future of their club. Elsie, the vice-captain of the U18 girls' team, voiced her frustration, stating, "So much for encouraging girls football. How disappointing." The disappointment was echoed by the manager of the team, **Steve Luff**, who stated: "It's a grave mistake to prioritise commercial interests or go for the cachet of a professional club over the development of local athletes, who represent the true future of football."

Pauline Russell, the Chairwoman of Epsom & Ewell Colts, claims that Blenheim School's decision to displace the team in favour of a professional club "goes against the objectives and aims of the school listed in their last annual report." This refers to Blenheim School's objective 'to promote for the benefit of the inhabitants of Epsom and the surrounding area the provision of facilities and recreation'.

Rob Williams, Director of Finance and Operations at Blenheim School responded "Blenheim made the decision to offer their 3G pitch to Chelsea FC on Tuesdays and Thursdays to further develop their existing relationship with Chelsea FC and in support of the work they are doing to develop grassroots youth football opportunities in the local community, particularly with girls. This change was not the fault of Chelsea FC or Chelsea Foundation.

"Blenheim have offered several alternative days and times for Epsom and Ewell Colts to move their Thursday booking to and are delighted that they have made additional bookings on Mondays, Saturdays and Sundays to use the newly installed 3G pitch which has seen unprecedented demand.

In the face of a possible crisis at the club, Pauline Russell is making an attempt to rally the community, stating: "We are calling on the community, local authorities, and Chelsea FC to recognise the importance of grassroots sports and to work with us to find a solution that allows these 170 girls to continue their training on Thursdays without disruption."

While the club searches for alternative venues and potential collaborations with other local organisations, they have put forward an online petition for the public to show their support.

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