

Report to: Strategic Planning Committee



Date of Meeting 23 February 2021

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East Devon Playing Pitch Strategy

Report summary:

This report provides an update on work undertaken on production of a new East Devon Playing Pitch Strategy noting that the Covid pandemic has had significant impacts on the ability to make progress on the work. The report also highlights options for completing this work.

Recommendation:

1. That Members note the progress to date on a new playing pitch strategy for East Devon;
2. That Members consider the options for progressing the new playing pitch strategy and member instruction is sought on how to take this work forward.

Reason for recommendation: To advise committee of progress to date made on the East Devon Playing Pitch Strategy.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action
- Corporate Services and COVID-19 Response and Recovery
- Democracy and Transparency
- Economy and Assets
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities

Financial implications: There are no financial implications which require comment.

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications at this stage other than the impact on Local Plan production should be noted.

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk;

Links to background information Link to East Devon Playing Pitch Strategy 2015:
<https://eastdevon.gov.uk/media/1182367/adopted-east-devon-pps-2015.pdf>

Link to [Council Plan](#):

Priorities (check which apply)

- Outstanding Place and Environment
- Outstanding Homes and Communities
- Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity
- Outstanding Council and Council Services

1 Introduction and overview

- 1.1 Members may recall that on the 26 March 2019 Strategic Planning Committee received and endorsed a report advising on a work plan for production of a new Playing Pitch Strategy for East Devon. From a Council perspective the work has been undertaken to date by the Planning Policy team. External consultants have not been employed.
- 1.2 Early work on strategy production ran through 2019 with initial engagement undertaken with Sport England and the governing bodies for:
 - Football;
 - Rugby Union;
 - Cricket; and
 - Hockey.
- 1.3 The previous Playing Pitch Strategy, from 2015, addressed playing pitch supply and need for the above sports. The initial assumption on the new strategy, backed up by work undertaken so far, is that the new work should concentrate on these sports again. It is important to note that the strategy is being produced in accordance with Sport England guidance and it is for outdoor pitch provision for team sports with at least a reasonable level of participation, this was key to concentrating on the listed sports.

2 Work undertaken on the strategy prior to Covid

- 2.1 There was a considerable amount of work undertaken in 2019 and early 2020 on the Playing Pitch Strategy, before the pandemic. Tasks were primarily desk based and a large part of the work involved assimilating data from various previous assessments and collecting new information to provide a comprehensive database of:
 - Every sports club and each of the teams they support playing in East Devon;
 - Information on non-East Devon based teams that travel into the District play home matches and East Devon based teams that travel out of the District for home matches.;
 - All of the pitches in East Devon that each team usually plays its home matches on;
 - The specific pitch that each team plays their home matches on and from this the number of games played per week per pitch and at what times (during the playing season).

- 2.2 For the new proposed Playing Pitch Strategy comprehensive information can be provided on the above, some summary succinct observations from work already undertaken are, however, set out below (noting that significantly more information has already been assimilated).
- 2.3 Initial work on the Playing Pitch Strategy records 32 football clubs for the 2018/19 season that are based in and play their home games in East Devon. These clubs support a total of 197 separate teams (57 at adult level and the remainder are youth teams) and they make use of 134 different pitches. There are also a number of Exeter based teams that play in East Devon. The available evidence shows a very small net decline in football clubs in East Devon from the position in 2015, but an increase in the actual number of teams. There are 11 ladies/girls teams and also in the youngest ages groups mixed gender teams.
- 2.4 There are five rugby clubs that are East Devon based and that play in East Devon, there is, however, a sixth team, Exeter Youth rugby, that are Exeter based but that play in the district. The overall total number of teams fielded by these clubs has not changed significantly since the 2015 strategy was completed with no changes at the adult male level (10 teams in total are playing), one extra colts team playing (up from four to five) and one extra ladies team (up from one to two). Girl's rugby has seen the most significant changes over recent years with the 2015 Playing Pitch Strategy recording five teams which has now increased to nine. Junior team levels have gone up marginally, from 47 to 49.
- 2.5 Initial assessment for the new Playing Pitch Strategy showed that there were 69 men's cricket teams playing in the district, two ladies teams, 58 youth teams and 3 girls teams. The work records these teams playing on 26 pitches in East Devon.
- 2.6 Hockey sees the lowest participation levels of the sports addressed. There are currently two England Hockey affiliated clubs based in East Devon; Honiton Hornets Hockey Club and Sidmouth & Ottery Hockey Club. There is a team called the East Devon Hockey Club, which formerly played in East Devon district, but who have played and trained in the city of Exeter for a number of years. However another Exeter based club, Exe Hockey Club, run a junior Satellite Club at Exmouth and have some senior training displaced from the city to Lympstone.
- 2.7 All of the pitches that are played on are specifically mapped out on the Council's Geographical Information System mapping software.

Provision and use of grass pitches

- 2.8 The database that has been developed records the previous, 2015 assessment, of the quality of each grass pitch in respect to a range of factors, including, meeting minimum size standards, any pitch slopes, grass coverage, pitch maintenance and drainage. There has been some but limited updating of this past information. This information provides an overview of the number of matches that any pitch might be able to typically and reasonably accommodate during a week. Match capacity can vary greatly depending on these factors, for example grass football pitches have been assessed as having scope to accommodate anything from one to six matches per week. Though under very wet rainy conditions, often found in the depths of winter, carrying capacity even for the best pitches can drop significantly. The database allows for comparison of games typically expected to be played

on any pitch against the modelled capacity in order to assess any degree of possible over use or under use.

2.9 Significant caveats are, however, that:

- under or over use assessment reflect pitch considerations from 2015;
- at present assessment does not take into account any training that takes place on any pitch; and
- the team activity information predates Covid, noting that the pandemic may have impacts on current/recent activity levels with possible longer term impacts.

All of these factors will need some future consideration.

2.10 The 2015 Playing Pitch Strategy presented a picture of many grass pitches, specifically with training use being taken into account, being used at or beyond reasonable carrying capacity. Previously the overuse of pitches was a common concern of clubs with a number advising that with more or better pitch provision they would be able to support more teams. Whilst there has been some changes from 2015 to the present day the expectation remains of insufficient grass pitch supply (both in pitch numbers and quality) to meet demands and aspirations for play.

Artificial grass pitches

2.11 Artificial grass pitches (AGP) have developed over the years and have a number of distinct advantages over grass pitches, most importantly they are far less susceptible to seasonal wear and tear and can accommodate many more matches and training sessions. Because of the extra games that can be played on them AGPs will frequently be floodlit to allow for evening use. AGPs are, however, expensive to install and surfaces do need periodic maintenance, repair and replacement. They can also be more intrusive in the landscape, especially so where floodlit. Where they are close to housing their use, including from noise generated and floodlighting from extended evening use, can have negative amenity impacts.

2.12 There are ten recorded AGPs in East Devon though a small multi-use surface at Cloakham Lawns in Axminster is completely unusable and the Exeter City training pitch at the Cat and Fiddle site is understood to not provide for public access (it is used exclusively by the professional football club). It should be noted that hockey matches are now exclusively played on AGPs and not natural grass pitches, whilst different pitch types are suited for different sport uses and rugby, in particular, requires specific surface types.

2.13 To illustrate information held Appendix 1 of this report comprises of a database generated report of the AGPs in East Devon. The appendix details are in draft and need to be verified by those running and using the sites. As can be seen a considerable amount of information is held and it should be noted that comparable types of details are also held on all grass pitches in the District.

Verification of information

2.14 Based on the information summarised above the next stage of work was to be a verification exercise. Mostly working through the sport's governing, though with some direct contact

with pitch providers and sports clubs themselves, the intention was to seek to verify and update the accuracy of the information held. Some of this information is dated and such matters as the quality and maintenance regimes at pitches can be expected to have changed. However with a record of previous pitch assessment available it was hoped that the new assessment would be quicker and easier than previous work. Specifically noting that the previous assessment involved a considerable amount of on-site measurement.

- 2.15 The verification work did not proceed, however, because of the Covid pandemic, nor did work looking into any latent unmet demand or future demand generated through projected population growth in the District.

3 Partnership working and the impacts of Covid

- 3.1 The playing pitch strategy work is based on partnership working with sport governing bodies, they, amongst other things, will typically take the lead on contacting and consulting sports clubs. With the Covid pandemic leading to lockdown in early 2020 the governing bodies were unable to take forward planning activities and instead needed to turn their full attention to seeking to sustain the operation and income of existing sports clubs. It was not practical, therefore, to make further progress on the playing pitch strategy until the immediate Covid concerns and impacts on sports clubs had diminished.
- 3.2 At the time of writing this report (February 2021) there had been some resumption of sports matches and it is hoped that something much closer to normal will apply later in 2021. Over the months ahead it is hoped that the sports governing bodies will be able to offer proactive support in respect of progressing the strategy, though until they are able to help in partnership work there is only limited immediate further progress that can be made on strategy development.
- 3.3 There is as well, an unknown aspect over the degree to which lockdown may impact on sport participation rates (both current and into the longer term) and this could impact on any strategy findings or conclusions. Upcoming work may indicate merit in deferring further progress on the strategy until we get a clearer picture of what pitch demand patterns may look like in the future.

4 Using the research to make strategy and policy choices

- 4.1 When a comprehensive record of pitch quality and use, as well as demand for pitches has been established, the next stages of work move into the actual exercise of defining the strategy.
- 4.2 Information gathered is then drawn together, assessed and turned into a plan of action detailing what we want to do, where and why. This is expected to include a number of 'what if' scenario testing exercises that subsequently lead to specific recommendations and actions for specific sites and sports. An output from this work (as included in the 2015 strategy) can be expected to be outcomes around:
- Protect – guidance and recommendations on protecting the use of pitches that already exists (unless demonstrably over-supply is identified).
 - Enhance – making better and best use of existing facilities and pitches; and

- Provide – identify potential opportunities to provide new pitches.

4.3 Having developed the strategy it can be written up and if felt appropriate we could consult on it. This element of work would be expected to be undertaken jointly with Sport England and sport governing bodies, it is also where the Council will need to make choices about where priorities may lie and potential funding should be directed.

4.4 The Playing Pitch Strategy should be regarded as the key document within the study area guiding the improvement and protection of playing pitch provision. It needs to be the document people regularly turn to for information on how the current demand is met and what actions are required to improve the situation and meet future demand. Ideally it will be in place to inform local plan production and policy content.

4.5 The Sport England guidance highlights potential uses of the strategy to include:

- Sports Development Planning - helping with planning with and for sports facility provision;
- Planning Policy – informing and assisting with preparing future policy options and choices;
- Planning Applications – including supporting applications and resisting inappropriate loss of pitches;
- Community Infrastructure Levy – including assisting with making funding decisions;
- Funding Bids – providing evidence to inform and justify bids;
- Facility and Asset Management – informing management decision in respect of facilities;
- Public Health - informing public health actions and decisions;
- Co-ordinating Resources and Investment – helping to plan and manage investment decisions;
- Capital Programmes - Provide evidence to justify protection and investment and inform programmes of works; and
- Monitoring delivery – the recommendations and actions of and in the Playing Pitch Strategy should be monitored.

5 Options for continuing the Playing Pitch Strategy to a conclusion

5.1 This report highlights that there are two substantive component parts in preparing a new Playing Pitch Strategy;

- i. The first is to have a sound understanding of the current situation. We are part way through this exercise though the onset of Covid prevented the work being completed;
- ii. The second stage is the ‘what do we want to do with the information’ we have collected (what actually is the strategy and resulting proposed actions).

5.2 In terms of taking the work forward a challenge for the Planning Policy team is the lack of time and staff to complete the work in a speedy manner. Given the importance attached to preparing a new local plan work priorities have shifted in the team directly towards plan and

policy production. This leaves limited time for extra work, albeit we hope to have new staff members in post in the Spring of this year. There is, however and because of Covid, a distinct unknown in respect of current participation in sport and future needs and desires for pitch provision.

- 5.3 The participation data we hold pre-dates Covid and in recent months participation levels might have fallen, we have not tested this. To use current data may, therefore, provide skewed participation levels, whereas if we wait for a 'new normal' to emerge we could have more confidence of accuracy, but could be waiting for some time. Perhaps the most credible position would be to work to the information from 2018/19 for now on the basis that another early update may be required.
- 5.4 In order to complete the Playing Pitch Strategy the following approaches may be taken and a steer from committee is sought on the best way forward: Set out below are suggested options:
- a) Officers of the Planning Policy section complete the Playing Pitch Strategy – though noting that Local Plan production is a priority and concentrating on it could delay completion of the strategy – work may need to be fitted in when time and opportunities permit;
 - b) Production of the Playing Pitch Strategy is deferred until a new post-Covid stable 'new-normal' position emerges.
 - c) Consultants are commissioned to undertake the work – the cost of doing this is an unknown and there is no budget currently identified for undertaking the work in this way. There is also a risk that consultants may not wish to progress with work already undertaken and may want to start afresh.
- 5.5 In terms of timescales for each of these options it is difficult to estimate how long each may take given uncertainties over Covid-19 and the availability of Sport England, the governing bodies and local clubs to help to inform this work. It also depends substantially on how much of the currently held data can be reused and the extent of further surveying of sites. Although the commissioning of consultants would bring in additional resource commissioning and instructing them is itself time consuming. Either way it is likely to be in the region of 12-18 months before a draft report could be made available for Members to review.
- 5.6 One of the key reasons for updating the playing pitch strategy is to support local clubs in seeking external funding for identified enhancements as most funding regimes give priority to projects that are identified as part of a wider strategy for sports pitch provision. It is therefore important for both planning and delivery that the strategy is kept up to date.
- 5.7 There are already a range of Sport England funds centred around changes due to Covid-19 available branded as "Return to Play" and other funding opportunities may come forward in the future to help sports clubs recover and invest. There is therefore a need for good up to date evidence to support these bids although it is worth noting that some areas do not have a playing pitch strategy at all of the ones they do have may be older than ours.

5.8 It is also worth noting that the Football Foundation produced a Local Football Facility Plan for East Devon in September 2019 which identifies a number of key areas for investment in football facilities in the district. This would provide good strategic evidence for football clubs.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Depending on the approach preferred by Members there will most likely need to be an update report presented to committee on how work is progressing in the not too distant future.