

Report to: Leisure Strategy Delivery Forum

Date of Meeting 14th January 2025

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Playing Pitch Audit and Strategy Update

Report summary:

This report provides an outline of the Playing Pitch Audit (PPA) that is now taking place. A further update will be presented to the next Forum in April 2025. Playing pitches are a critical element of open space provision, they allow people to enjoy outdoor sporting activity with associated recreation, social and health benefits. The PPA will feed into the Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS), which covers the whole of East Devon district, is specifically concerned with the protection and enhancement of existing outdoor pitches and provision of new outdoor pitches for:

- cricket
- football
- hockey
- rugby union
- Tennis; and
- Bowls

Planning policy has a particularly important role and relevance to the protection (resistance of loss to other uses and development) of playing fields and also in respect of new provision of pitches in response to plans and allocations of land for growth and development. Paragraphs 103 and 104 of the [National Planning Policy Framework \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/policy-framework) elaborate on key matters and paragraph 103 specifically advises "Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities"

Sport England (as a statutory planning consultee) raises objections to local plans that are not supported by such evidence. Playing Pitch Strategies need, under Sport England guidance, to be reviewed every five years and with the previous strategy dating back 2015 it is critical for the local plan that a new strategy is produced. Planning is one of the means, through developer contributions and on-site provision alongside new building works, to secure new or enhance existing pitch provision.

The new strategy will support the local plan but critically it will also help set a corporate and wider partner and partnership agenda to direct and secure resources to encourage the use, promotion and management of playing fields to provide a resource for all people, at all stages of life in order to take advantage of the opportunities they offer.

Strategic Leisure have been appointed to take the lead role in carrying out the audit. This will underpin an updated Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) that supersedes a previous strategy that was completed in 2015 by planning colleagues and will be produced in collaboration with the national sporting bodies of the sports listed.

In due course a further report will come to the Forum in terms of proposals for what is included in the new Playing Pitch Strategy and recommendations will then be made to Cabinet. It will be essential that any action plan both addresses the requirements but is also deliverable.

This report also includes the proposed vision and objectives that would be recommended within the proposed Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) from 2025 that will be considered by Cabinet at the final stage.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget

Yes ☒ No ☐

Policy Framework Yes ☒ No ☐

Recommendation:

That the Forum notes the progress that has been made on the Playing Pitch Audit (PPA) and highlight any areas that warrant further discussion.

Reason for recommendation:

To comply with a monitoring, delivery and reporting framework for the delivery of the Playing Pitch Strategy and Action Plan.

It provides an opportunity to work with internal Services and provide support in the delivery of the key priorities and identify where additional resource may be required to ensure completion of the tasks.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- ☐ Climate Action and Emergency Response
- ☐ Coast, Country and Environment
- ☐ Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- ☐ Communications and Democracy
- ☐ Economy
- ☒ Finance and Assets
- ☒ Strategic Planning
- ☐ Sustainable Homes and Communities
- ☒ Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; The timetable includes both internal and external dependencies and adherence to this timetable will be monitored through the Leisure Strategy Delivery Forum.

Links to background information

Appendix 1 – Programme for East Devon Playing Pitch Strategy and Audit

Click here to enter links to background information; appendices online; and previous reports. These must link to an electronic document. Do not include any confidential or exempt information.

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- ☒ A supported and engaged community
 - ☐ Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery
 - ☒ Resilient economy that supports local business
 - ☐ Financially secure and improving quality of service
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1.0 Background and context

- 1.1 This PPA focuses on pitches across East Devon at which there is some form of public access noting that there are some pitches that are not accessible or have very limited accessibility to the public. It should be noted that the 'pitch' reference in this audit should also be read to apply

to tennis courts, unless used in reference to a specified sport or referenced otherwise. The pitches assessed include both natural grass and artificial grass pitches (AGPs) as well as various tennis courts surfaces and some other hard surfaced areas currently or previously used for sports use.

- 1.2 There is also a need to reflect on securing access to pitches that do exist, however does not permit or have limited public access. School sites are a typical example mindful of how much capacity such pitches can tolerate and managing access to and off site as well as changing room provision. Many clubs do have open memberships, however only elite teams play on the best pitches they have available.
- 1.3 The overall Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) is underpinned by audits, consultation and a “needs led” analysis of sport and recreation across the district creating a detailed evidence base. Due to the long-term nature of the plan, it is essential that it responds to changing needs and priorities. “Regular consultation and review of supporting information is important, particularly to provide robust evidence to support and inform planning and investment decisions”.
- 1.4 The PPA will provide the evidence of need for provision on development sites through S106 Agreements and for informing priorities for the use of Community Infrastructure Levy funds for off-site provision. They will also underpin applications for grants to major funding organisations, being based on up-to-date research and evidence.
- 1.5 Once the PPA has been ratified by National Governing Bodies (NGB’s) and Sport England, the council will consider a report to formally adopt the ensuing Strategy and Action Plan. Those actions will be dependent on any on-going revenue or capital costs arising from proposals to enhance or provide new facilities being identified and appropriate additional resources secured before any scheme can be approved. Due regard will also be taken to integrate any schemes into other council projects and strategies that are in place. (i.e. Cranbrook).
- 1.6 The production of this PPS started in 2019 before the pandemic occurred. The pandemic, however, put production of the PPS on hold whilst other matters in the sporting world took priority. Many NGB staff were furloughed. In 2022 work was restarted and refreshed, however it has required additional resource through commissioning Strategic Leisure to complete the PPA to reach planned completion in summer 2025.
- 1.7 The pandemic had significant short-term impacts on levels of sporting activity and on sports clubs and participation levels. On a positive note, sport participation levels reported in 2022 and into 2023/24 are not significantly different to those of pre-pandemic years and in some cases, including at youth levels and female participation, this strategy reports on notable increases in participation.
- 1.8 The Local Plan sets out the scale for future housing and therefore population growth and pitch provision will need to respond to this, - there may be scope to update this PPS as Local Plan work progresses.

2 Playing Pitch Audit - Approach

- 2.1 This PPA is being produced in line with the Sport England methodology to produce Playing Pitch Strategies: “Developing and Implementing a Playing Pitch Strategy: A Step by Step Approach” –
- 2.2 The methodology has been developed by Sport England in partnership with sporting National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to ensure a collaborative approach is taken which will result in a strategy ‘owned’ by a range of partners.
- 2.3 The approach taken in strategy production reflects the differences in how each sport is played and pitches are used to understand capacity and use levels, and to ensure the strategy is able to be implemented and kept up to date.

- 2.4 The methodology considers statistics on population levels and future projected changes and sport participation levels, and it provides an assessment of needs and demands of sports and clubs. The strategy considers the need for sport pitches along-side a site-by-site assessment of pitches across East Devon, specifically in respect of their quality, demands made of them and their scope for improvement.
- 2.5 Strategic Leisure were commissioned to deliver the study based on the Sport England guidance has 5 stages broken down into individual steps as detailed in the programme in Appendix 1. There is also a Project Plan in Appendix 2.

3.0 East Devon Playing Pitch Audit and Strategy

- 3.1 The Forum is asked to review the Vision and Objectives for this project. These are based on the original Playing Pitch Strategy that was endorsed by Cabinet in 2015.

Vision:

The vision of the PPS is to ensure that sufficient pitches are provided of a good quality and which support the needs of each sport and the clubs around East Devon taking account of cross-border considerations with adjoining local authorities. This provision should be sufficient and flexible to deal with current and projected increases in demand.

3.2 Objectives

The methodology explains that a clear set of objectives should be drawn up which relate to the 10 steps (as set out in Appendix 1). They should be practical, relate to specific outcomes and achievements, be measurable, and help guide the management of the work. The objectives set out below relate to the step numbers in the methodology.

- a) To produce a well-researched, robustly evidenced strategy specific to East Devon that takes account of local demands and trends
- b) To utilise existing studies/data/information regarding facilities and sites where possible to avoid duplication and where this is not possible gather using a simple survey method
- c) To gather demand information using a simple survey method and by utilising as much information available from NGBs as possible
- d) To audit all sites individually by visiting them in person
- e) To create a strategy that enables the current stock of playing pitches to be enhanced and improved and future provision to be tailored and provided in line with priorities
- f) To identify the key sites, issues and priorities for investment
- g) To develop an on-going action plan that is realistic, achievable and allows for future updating/reviewing
- h) To adopt this strategy with Member approval
- i) To apply the findings of this strategy to improve and enhance existing facilities and prioritise investment in specific new facilities and
- j) To keep the strategy robust and up to date through annual reviews

3.3 Strategy management

This PPA and PPS will be delivered by a project steering group led by the Place, Assets and Commercialisation Service along with the Planning Policy Team of the Council with officers of other departments invited to participate. External (to the District Council) inputs have been provided by sport governing bodies and Sport England.

The project steering group will also need to consider how the strategy informs the way in which existing pitches are managed, maintained and enhanced. This is notable in East Devon where there are many bodies with ownership / responsibility for their own facilities.

3.4 Timescale

Strategic Leisure have undertaken the summer sports assessment in September 2024, and the winter sports assessments started in late December.

Overall, the PPS could be finalised by June 2025, depending on timescales for sign off by the NGBs. However, the assessment itself will be available i.e. Stage C from April 2025.

4.0 Conclusion

- 4.1 Whilst challenges exist, East Devon District Council will use this audit to help inform its PPS and investment decisions, to support bids for grants and funding and in setting standards and levels for new sports pitch provision.
- 4.2 The PPA and PPS will also be used as evidence to help determine planning applications and inform future planning policy requirements in the new East Devon local plan or other planning policy documents.
- 4.3 Other bodies are encouraged to use the PPS to inform their investment and improvement plans and the District Council will use the strategy to inform decisions on partnerships that it may enter into.
- 4.4 This PPS will support efforts to ensure that the sports facilities in the district continue to provide a choice of quality and accessible opportunities for participation in sport.

Financial implications:

There are no immediate financial implications identified at this stage, but the PPS itself will require financial resources to deliver and this will need to be considered in its formulation.

Legal implications:

As noted in Appendix 1 (Stage E: Step 8), full Council's approval may be required to the revised Strategy when it is in its final form. This should be addressed at the point that the draft Strategy is submitted to Cabinet for approval, by way of Officer recommendations stage.

Programme for East Devon Playing Pitch Strategy and Audit

	Scope	Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Strategy (PPOSS)
	Facilities	Grass pitches (football, cricket, rugby union, rounders, softball) Artificial grass pitches – 3G, sand-based Outdoor Tennis/Netball Courts
	Sports	Football – junior and senior Rugby Union – junior and senior Cricket – junior and senior Hockey – junior and senior Tennis Bowls Netball
Stage A	Step 1: Prepare and tailor the approach	
Step 1	<p>Firstly, review the audit and demand work completed to date and what has changed since the 2015/16 PPOSS and the most recent audit in 2022.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with all pitch NGBs and Sport England and check if in the light of identified changes in terms of pitch numbers/quality, Agreed to re-do all audits as it should be completed every 5 years and 2025 updates need to reflect latest trends and changes. (i.e. girls football) 	
Stage B: Step 2	Step 2: Gathering supply information and views <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify Supply - qualitative and quantitative audit of all agreed facility types. We will audit summer sports first and then winter sports. We will need confirmation of any technical Pitch Power assessments undertaken since 2021. <p>We understand there are 281 pitches located across 202 sites. Of these 13 are artificial grass pitches. There are in addition 87 outdoor tennis courts on 38 sites.</p>	
Stage B: Step 3	Step 3: Gathering demand information and views <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify any changes in quality of pitches- location, pitch type and nature (see above) Identify all relevant clubs and teams across the sports in scope (2024/25 season) and contact them (online survey or face to face dependant on NGB preference) to recheck the demand – level and nature; this is likely to be most critical in football where an increase in junior teams will impact on the number and type of pitches needed. Identify the extent of the changes (quality, number and types of teams) and which sport(s)/facilities are affected Identify Demand - consultation with stakeholders, schools, clubs, parishes and town councils, NGBs, Sport England Map all provision (using GIS) to show current locations, types and extent of outdoor pitches and facilities <p>Consultation will be undertaken through a combination of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Face to face meetings (assuming these are possible) Online meetings Online and hard copy surveys Telephone calls Focus groups (in person/online) Emails 	

	<p>Source information from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ONS/Strategic housing Allocation reports • Active Lives • Pitch Power • NGBs • Active Places Power • NGB Strategies • Club, Parish and Town Council surveys • School surveys • League consultation
<p><i>Stage C</i> <i>Step 4</i></p>	<p>Step 4: Understand how each site is being used</p> <p>Understand the situation at each site through stakeholder and wider consultation, audit and assessment, and identify how each site is being used - what, who, when.</p>
<p><i>Stage C</i> <i>Step 5</i></p>	<p>Step 5: Develop the current picture of provision</p> <p>Understand population increases and new housing development alongside the strategic context to inform the wider background to individual pitches, teams and sports.</p>
<p><i>Stage C</i> <i>Step 6</i></p>	<p>Step 6: Identify the key findings and issues</p> <p>What are the main characteristics of the current and future supply of, and demand for, provision? 2. Is there enough accessible and secured community use provision to meet current and future demand? 3. Is the provision that is accessible of sufficient quality and appropriately managed? Sign Off Stage C against Stage C Checklist</p>
<p><i>Stage D</i> <i>Step 7</i></p>	<p>Step 7: Develop the recommendations and action plan</p> <p>Prepare draft and Final reports, all technical appendices and Recommendations, and the Action Plans – site by site and sport by sport.</p> <p>Develop any new scenarios relevant to the new Local Plan and assess impact against the findings of the supply and demand assessment.</p> <p>Application of the Supply and Demand Analysis - Where is provision lacking and for whom? What type of provision is needed moving forward and why? What are the opportunities to address under-supply?</p> <p>We would use Sport England's Playing Pitch Calculator Tool and current 24/25 team numbers for each sport plus the number of new homes multiplied by average household size to identify the development population household size to be agreed with planners. The revised stage C and D analysis will identify additional capacity, if any, at accessible existing sites.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop Recommendations for future provision – based on Protect, Enhance, Provide, • Develop facility type and site-specific action plans • Provide draft and final reports <p>At each stage we would draft the PPOSS Stage for discussion and sign off by Sport England, NGBs and the council.</p> <p>The above covers PPOSS Stages A-D; Stage E is effectively done through a Steering group once the PPOSS is signed off.</p> <p>We would need the council to provide: Population data, GIS layers to facilitate mapping, stakeholder contacts, signposting to key policy documents.</p>

Stage E - Steps 8, 9 and 10 are usually delivered by the Council.

<i>Stage E:</i> <i>Step 8</i>	Step 8: Write and adopt the Strategy Write the Strategy and report seeking endorsement by Cabinet /Council.
<i>Stage E:</i> <i>Step 9</i> <i>Step 10</i>	Step 9 and 10: Deliver the strategy and keep it robust and up to date Apply and deliver the strategy Keep the strategy robust and up to date