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**PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Nick Wallis, Health and Leisure Portfolio**

**Responsible Director – Cliff Brown, Director of Community Services**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Cabinet for the Playing Pitch Strategy at **Appendix 1**.

**Information and Analysis**

2. The Playing Pitch Strategy has been produced using the methodology specified in the Sport England ‘toolkit’ and in line with the criteria of PPG17 and Sport England Policy. Sport England is responsible for promoting and investing in sport in England and for helping the Government meet its sporting objectives and distributing both Lottery and Exchequer funds to sport.
3. The Sport England Playing Pitch Methodology covers football pitches (adult, junior and mini pitches), cricket pitches, rugby pitches and hockey pitches. This methodology assesses specific requirements of individual teams and then translates the requirements into an assessment of “peak demand” for pitches.
4. The Playing Pitch Strategy, which is attached as Appendix 1, has necessarily required a significant amount of time to produce. The development of the strategy, utilising the prescribed methodology, has required focused work carrying out physical audits and inspections, data analysis and extensive consultation. The strategy covers all of the Borough of Darlington, including the villages and rural areas.
5. The strategy has been developed with the support of a Steering Group comprising:
  - (a) Ian Thompson, Assistant Director – Environmental Services
  - (b) Valerie Adams, Planning Officer
  - (c) Steve Thompson, Assistant Director – Culture
  - (d) Representative from Sport England
  - (e) Representative from Children’s Services
  - (f) Emma Reah, Sport and Physical Activity Development Manager
  - (g) Julie Young, Project Officer
  - (h) Michelle Forrest, Service Support & Project Officer
  - (i) Community representatives from: rugby, cricket, football and hockey.

6. The strategy is underpinned by consultation with key stakeholders and a review of information held by Darlington Borough Council including:
  - (a) An audit of pitches owned and managed by Darlington Borough Council;
  - (b) A review of previous research carried out within key Council departments;
  - (c) A telephone and postal survey of all education sites within the authority;
  - (d) A telephone and postal survey to all identified sports clubs and teams;
  - (e) A telephone and postal survey to all private clubs providing sports pitches within the borough;
  - (f) Quality and ancillary facility assessments of all pitch sites throughout the study area;
  - (g) Demographic information;
  - (h) Planning policy;
  - (i) Other plans and strategies impacting on the Playing Pitch Strategy;
  - (j) National policy, advice and best practice.
7. The strategy is split into six sections:
  - (a) Introduction
  - (b) Methodology
  - (c) Supply of and Demand for Pitches – Where are we now.
  - (d) Area assessments, covering each of the five areas of Darlington.
  - (e) Local standards – setting the future standards for sports pitches in Darlington.
  - (f) Action Plan – sets out future actions required to ensure quality playing pitches in Darlington.
8. The findings contained in the strategy will feed into appropriate planning documents. The strategy itself will be regularly monitored and reviewed and updated after five years.
9. The vision for the Playing Pitch Strategy is:

*‘To protect, maintain and enhance an accessible network of playing pitch provision that meets the current and anticipated demand from all the teams based in the borough that wish to play home games, on a pitch that is of sufficient quality and with suitable ancillary facilities close by.’*

10. The objectives of the strategy are:
- (a) To ensure all playing pitches are safe and of a specific quality standard
  - (b) To ensure where possible playing pitches have suitable ancillary facilities
  - (c) To make the most efficient use of the existing playing pitch resource
  - (d) To provide a carefully quantified and documented assessment of current and future needs for playing pitches
  - (e) To use the Playing Pitch Strategy to support relevant related policies and strategies
  - (f) To improve and maintain those pitches identified as poor or lacking in ancillary facilities in the strategy findings
  - (g) To enable the development of standards of provision to ensure the adequate provision of pitches in relation to new housing developments per 1000 population
  - (h) To encourage enhanced partnership working between the Council, local education sites and teams throughout the borough to identify funding methods, improve communications and growth of sport in the borough.

### **Key Issues**

11. The analysis of current playing pitch provision indicated that there are 90 sports pitches throughout the Borough. Of these, 74 are available for public use through either informal or formal access agreements. The findings confirmed that there are:
- (a) 71 football pitches
  - (b) 11 rugby pitches
  - (c) 7 cricket pitches
  - (d) 1 Astroturf hockey pitches
12. From Section 3 – supply and demand area assessments, the following key issues are identified:
- (a) Football
    - Pitch provision is distributed throughout the borough, but is largely concentrated upon school sites.
    - Many senior pitches also accommodate junior and mini games, which contributes towards overuse and increased wear and tear on some pitches.
    - Across Darlington, there is underuse of junior and mini pitches, although this use is not spread evenly across the town due to individual club preferences.
    - Communication of pitch information in the borough is fragmented.
    - There is no consistent pricing structure for the hire of pitches at schools.

- There are a number of teams who play in league games using public parks as their home pitch – these pitches are generally of a poorer quality than pitches on education and club-owned sites.

(b) Rugby

- Darlington has two well-established rugby clubs that cater for all ages.
- There are six senior pitches provided by the two clubs that hold senior, junior and mini games.
- The findings identify marginal overuse of the pitches at Mowden Park Rugby Club, however, overall it is felt that demand is being satisfied at both clubs.
- A few schools have rugby pitches however these are mostly not used for community games.
- A major development is planned for Mowden Park Rugby Club to re-locate to the West Park Development.

(c) Cricket

- All Cricket pitches were analysed as being of ‘good’ quality, with the exception of Darlington Cricket Club’s pitch which was classified as ‘excellent’
- To gain extra income, clubs are hiring pitches to informal teams out of hours, which is leading to increased wear and tear.

(d) Hockey

- The only suitable pitch available is at Eastbourne Sports Complex but this is also used for other sports, leading to increased wear and tear.

13. The Playing Pitch Strategy also outlines several developments that will also affect supply of and demand for playing pitches. These developments include:-

- (a) Extended Schools and the role that school facilities can play in the supply of quality playing pitches.
- (b) School closures and re-developments, and more specifically the future of playing pitches linked to the land.
- (c) Planned pitch developments. Several large developments, such as the Eastbourne Academy and, at the time of data collection, Houghton Education Village, have had, and will continue to have an impact upon pitch provision.

14. The area based analysis resulted in the development of an Action Plan. The key themes of the action plan are as follows:

- (a) Theme 1: To improve existing pitches and ancillary facilities in Darlington.
- (b) Theme 2: To improve pitches to meet the Quality Standards set out in the Playing Pitch Strategy

- (c) Theme 3: To improve the communication and co-ordination of pitch provision in the borough
- (d) Theme 4: Address the supply and maintenance of pitches.
- (e) Theme 5: To improve access to playing pitches in Darlington.

### **Outcome of Consultation**

15. The Steering Group, in preparation of the strategy, have consulted with the following organisations both during and after the formulation of the strategy:

- All Darlington's relevant sporting clubs
- Community Partnerships
- SureStart
- Gypsy and Traveller community
- GOLD members
- Darlington's Senior Citizen's Association
- Punjabi and Hindi associations
- Sikh Missionary Society
- Islamic Women's Forum and Society
- Darlington Bangladeshi Society
- Darlington's Residents' Associations
- Disability Sport England
- Darlington District Youth and Community Council
- Darlington and Durham County Race Equality Council
- Darlington Association on Disability

16. Comments and suggestions received have been incorporated into the final strategy and in addition the strategy has been presented to Members of the Environment Scrutiny Committee.

### **Legal Implications**

17. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

### **Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998**

18. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. The provision of quality facilities for sport assists in the provision of diversionary activities, which are of significant assistance in the development of actions and plans to deal with anti-social behavior. This strategy will therefore, potentially have a positive impact on preventing crime and disorder.

## **Council Policy Framework**

19. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

## **Decision Deadline**

20. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

## **Key Decision**

21. Sport England is the statutory body for Playing Pitch policy. This revised Council Strategy is recognised by Sport England as being the policy document for all outdoor playing pitches. This is a key decision because the strategy will influence future planning policy and provide better monitoring of applications affecting playing fields.

## **Conclusion**

22. The Playing Pitch Strategy has been developed over a two-year period, supported by the Playing Pitch Strategy Steering Group. A significant amount of detailed information was collected using the specified Sport England methodology, which has produced a detailed picture of the current provision of playing pitches in Darlington.

## **Recommendation**

23. It is recommended that Cabinet agree the content of the Playing Pitch Strategy and support the delivery of the associated action plan.

## **Reasons**

24. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:
- (a) Sport England views Playing Pitch strategies as an essential element of underpinning its policy for the protection and provision of outdoor playing space
  - (b) The Playing Pitch Strategy will provide a policy framework to improve and protect playing pitch provision in line with future demand.

**Cliff Brown**  
**Director of Community Services**

## **Background Papers**

- (i) Playing Pitch Strategy and appendices.

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JSC