

SPECIAL HEALTH & HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
16 September 2026

DARLINGTON PLAYING PITCH AND FACILITIES STRATEGY DRAFT

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The report seeks the views of Scrutiny Committee on the emerging priorities for sport, leisure and physical activity provision across the Borough.
2. To present a draft Cabinet report to the committee that outlines the findings and strategic recommendations arising from the review of the Playing Pitch and Facilities Strategy for Darlington.

Lisa Soderman
Head of Leisure Services

CABINET

To be inserted

PLAYING PITCH AND FACILITIES STRATEGY

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Matthew Roche, Health and Housing Portfolio**

Responsible Director - To be inserted

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To present to Members the updated Playing Pitch and Built Facilities Strategy for approval.

Summary

2. The Playing Pitch and Facilities Strategy is updated on a periodic basis to reflect actions taken, new guidance and the future direction of travel to ensure the Council, Partners and other parties are best placed to improve facilities across the borough.
3. This updated strategy considers both indoor and outdoor sports facilities (including playing pitches) and sets out the strategic direction and site-specific priorities for the future delivery of sports facilities across the borough until 2036. It will remain a valid document for the period 2026–2031, when the next review will be undertaken.
4. The refresh of the Playing Pitch and Facilities Strategy identifies significant growth in participation across several sports, particularly amongst women, girls and young people. Whilst the borough generally retains a good range of sporting facilities, increasing participation and future housing growth are placing pressure on existing provision.
5. Key challenges include shortages of 3G artificial grass pitches, capacity constraints within football, rugby and cricket, ageing infrastructure, and the need to improve the quality of pitches and ancillary facilities.
6. The strategy concludes that protecting existing facilities, improving quality, securing external investment and creating additional capacity are critical to meeting current and future demand.
7. The Dolphin Centre remains a strategically important facility for both swimming and indoor sport provision, whilst Eastbourne Sports Complex continues to play a key role in the borough's sporting infrastructure.

8. The highest priority investment identified by the strategy is the delivery of additional 3G Artificial Grass Pitches to address borough-wide deficiencies and support continued growth in football and rugby participation.
9. Additional priorities include improvements to football hub sites, rugby infrastructure, cricket capacity, indoor and covered tennis provision, athletics facilities and continued investment in swimming pools and indoor leisure facilities.
10. The report outlines:
 - (a) An overview of the previous five years improvement and investment in infrastructure.
 - (b) Re-affirms the vision and the drivers for the strategy covering a range of sporting activity.
 - (c) Updates the strategy and action plan following a recognised Sport England methodology and consultation process with key stakeholders.

Recommendation

11. It is recommended that Cabinet approve the Playing Pitch and Built Facilities Strategy and action plan.

Reasons

12. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:
 - (a) To inform the Local Plan and the development of the borough and provide evidence of need when submitting bids into funding opportunities
 - (b) To ensure ongoing sustainability of the facility stock, ensuring that facilities are effectively managed and maintained and that best uses are made of existing resources;
 - (c) To drive participation in sport and leisure within the borough.

TO BE INSERTED

Background Papers

The previous strategy was used in the preparation of this report.

Lisa Soderman : Extension 6980
LC

Council Plan	The Playing Pitch and Facilities Strategy supports the vision of the Council Plan and the Health and Housing Portfolio by putting in place the foundations for access to excellent leisure facilities to improve health and leisure activity across the borough.
Addressing inequalities	Supports participation opportunities for all communities, particularly women, girls and young people.
Tackling Climate Change	Investment in existing facilities supports efficient use of community assets.
Efficient and effective use of resources	Provides an evidence base for future investment decisions and external funding bids.
Health and Wellbeing	Encourages increased physical activity, healthier lifestyles and improved wellbeing.
S17 Crime and Disorder	Increased participation in sport can contribute positively to community safety and engagement. By providing appropriate playing pitches and facilities can have a positively impact on reducing Crime and Disorder.
Wards Affected	All wards
Groups Affected	There is a positive impact on sporting groups and clubs.
Budget and Policy Framework	There is no impact on the Budget and Policy framework.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Introduction

13. In May 2025, Darlington Borough Council appointed Sports Planning Consultants (SPC) to produce a Sports Facilities Strategy (SFS). This strategy updates the current strategy which was produced in 2021.
14. The primary purpose of this SFS is to provide a strategic framework for indoor and outdoor sports facilities (including playing pitches). It evaluates the adequacy of existing provision and sets out the strategic direction and site-specific priorities for the future delivery of sports facilities across the borough up to 2036. It will remain a valid document for the period 2026 – 2031.
15. Darlington Borough has maintained an up-to-date SFS since 2010. Over the years, the strategy has successfully driven significant improvement and investment into the sporting infrastructure across Darlington borough. Recent successes include:

- (a) Delivery of a second 3G AGP at Eastbourne Sports Complex in partnership with the Football Foundation.
 - (b) Refurbishment of the athletics track at Eastbourne Sports Complex.
 - (c) Creation of new playing field land at Staindrop Road.
 - (d) Improvement to clubhouse to support cricket at Rockcliffe Park.
 - (e) Ongoing upgrades to the indoor sports facilities at The Dolphin Centre.
 - (f) Significant investment into sports through S106 funding obtained from new development.
16. This strategy seeks to build on these successes and to deliver the sporting vision for the borough up to 2031. The vision for the strategy therefore remains the same, specifically:
- (a) *'To develop a comprehensive, robust, up-to-date and user-friendly assessment of sports provision and need in Darlington to ensure that the right amount and type of sports facilities are protected and where appropriate enhanced to provide a range of quality, accessible and safe facilities, in the right place at the right time to meet the needs of the community now and in future years.'*
17. The strategy will directly support the achievement of the visions and key priorities within both the Darlington Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2025 – 2029) and the Darlington Physical Activity Strategy (2025 – 2035). It will ensure that the facilities that are necessary to support participation in sport and physical activity in Darlington are provided.
18. The Playing Pitch and Facilities Strategy provides a comprehensive assessment of outdoor sports facilities, indoor sports provision and future facility requirements across Darlington. The strategy considers current demand, future participation trends, facility quality and accessibility, and the impact of future population and housing growth.

Structure and Scope

19. This updated assessment and strategy considers the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future need. The strategy includes strategic recommendations and a site-specific action plan for a range of facilities, specifically:
- (a) Playing pitches for football, cricket, rugby union and hockey.
 - (b) Outdoor sports facilities including tennis, bowls and athletics tracks.
 - (c) Indoor built facilities including swimming pools and sports halls.
20. This assessment report and strategy is attached as **Appendix 1**. This presents a full assessment of need for each of the facility types in scope. For each it seeks to:
- (a) provide an understanding of the current supply of facilities in Darlington borough;
 - (b) outline both the current demand and the projected demand up to 2036;
 - (c) summarise the views of key stakeholders;
 - (d) evaluates the adequacy of existing facilities (taking into account quantity, quality, accessibility and availability) and understand the extent of any unmet demand;
 - (e) identify the key issues that need to be addressed.

21. The strategy document contains clear and deliverable recommendations and a prioritised action plan attached as **Appendix 2**. These have been developed through the use of locally specific scenarios to evaluate the impact of each intervention.
22. **Appendix 3** provides a summary of the key points arising from the assessment report and action plan. The assessment identifies several key strategic themes:
 - (a) Participation in sport is growing, with the strongest increases occurring in women's, girls' and youth sport.
 - (b) Football, rugby union and cricket face the greatest capacity pressures across the borough.
 - (c) Facility quality is a significant issue, with poor drainage, maintenance regimes and ancillary facilities reducing usable capacity at a number of sites.
 - (d) There is a strategic shortfall in 3G Artificial Grass Pitch provision, affecting both football and rugby training and match capacity.
 - (e) Future housing growth is expected to place additional pressure on existing facilities unless further investment is secured.
 - (f) Protection of existing facilities and securing external funding are essential to delivering the strategy objectives.

Financial Implications

23. The strategy identifies a requirement for significant future investment across the borough's sports infrastructure. Delivery will be dependent upon a combination of Council resources, external grant funding, partnership investment and contributions associated with future development opportunities.
24. Any financial implications as a result of delivering the action plan will be brought back to Cabinet as any scheme progresses. Officers will continue to work with governing bodies to identify any potential funding opportunities

Outcome of Consultation

25. The strategy has been informed through consultation with national governing bodies, sports clubs, schools, facility providers and key stakeholders. Feedback received through the consultation process has been incorporated into the assessment and action plan.
26. Partners and consultees involved in the consultation process and development of the updated strategy were as follows:
 - (a) Sport England
 - (b) Durham Cricket Board
 - (c) Durham Football Association
 - (d) Lawn Tennis Association
 - (e) England Hockey
 - (f) Rugby Football Union
 - (g) England Athletics
 - (h) Football Foundation
 - (i) Tees Valley Sport
 - (j) Darlington Borough Council Leisure Services

- (k) Darlington Borough Council Planning Team
- (l) Sports Planning Consultants
- (m) Darlington Sports Clubs
- (n) Darlington School Sport Partnership
- (o) Bowls England
- (p) England Netball
- (q) Swim England

27. A special Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee considered the Playing Pitch and Facilities Strategy on 16 September 2026 and it was resolved:

(a) That the report be received.

(b) That Cabinet be advised of this Scrutiny's view that:

(i) To be inserted

(c) That Cabinet be advised of this Scrutiny's view that:

(i) To be inserted

(ii)