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Playing Pitch, Outdoor and Indoor Sport Strategy

Darlington Borough Council

Final Assessment Report

May 2026

Sports Planning Consultants. Registered in England number: 14184230
Registered Office: 20 Brook Road, Lymm, Cheshire, WA13 9AH
Tel 07917378083 Email neil@sportsplanningconsultants.co.uk

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 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.

1.2 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.

1.3 This document summarises the key findings of the assessment. The strategy document, which sets out how the issues identified in this assessment will be addressed, is found under separate cover.

Strategic Vision

1.4 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;

- Delivery of a second 3G AGP at Eastbourne Sports Complex in partnership with the Football Foundation
- Refurbishment of the athletics track at Eastbourne Sports Complex
- Creation of new playing field land at Staindrop Road
- Improvement to clubhouse to support cricket at Rockliffe Park
- Ongoing upgrades to the indoor sports facilities at The Dolphin Centre
- Significant investment into sports through S106 funding obtained from new development.

1.5 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;

'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.'

1.6 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.

Key Drivers

1.7 The primary purpose of a SFS is to provide a strategic framework to ensure that the provision of indoor and outdoor sports facilities meets the needs of current and future residents of the area. The creation of such a strategy responds directly to the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which evidences the importance of providing access to high quality opportunities for sport and recreation.

1.8 Locally in Darlington, the key drivers for updating the SFS are;

- To ensure that the document remains reflective of current needs so that the Council and key partners can continue to use it to inform decision making
- To provide the evidence required to protect valuable existing provision and support the delivery of new facilities where they are needed

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- To provide up to date evidence to inform the review of the Darlington Local Plan and policy / decision making
- To understand the impact of ongoing increases in participation, as well as the proposed housing on demand for playing fields and outdoor sports facilities
- To contribute to wider local and national goals to improve health and wellbeing through participation in sport.
- The strategy document will contain an up to date action plan. This action plan will be used to monitor the delivery of the required actions and will also be used to provide evidence on which to secure funding
- To support internal and external funding applications and facilitate the collection of S106 contributions.

Structure and Scope

1.9 This updated assessment and strategy considers the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future need. The strategy will include strategic recommendations and a site specific action plan for a range of facilities, specifically;

- Playing pitches for football, cricket, rugby union and hockey
- Outdoor sports facilities including tennis, bowls and athletics tracks
- Indoor built facilities including swimming pools and sports halls.

1.10 This assessment report presents a full assessment of need for each of the facility types in scope. For each it seeks to;

- provide an understanding of the current supply of facilities in Darlington Borough;
- outline both the current demand and the projected demand up to 2036
- summarise the views of key stakeholders
- evaluate the adequacy of existing facilities (taking into account quantity, quality, accessibility and availability) and understand the extent of any unmet demand,
- identify the key issues that need to be addressed.

1.11 The strategy document, which is under separate cover, contains clear and deliverable recommendations and a prioritised action plan. These have been developed through the use of locally specific scenarios to evaluate the impact of each intervention.

1.12 For clarity and ease of use and interpretation, this assessment report summarises the key issues on a sport by sport basis. It is structured as follows;

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- Section 2: Methodology - this section sets out the methodology undertaken
- Section 3: Cricket - this section outlines the current picture for cricket and evaluates the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future demand
- Section 4: Tennis - this section outlines the current picture for tennis and evaluates the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future demand
- Section 5: Bowls- this section outlines the current picture for bowls and evaluates the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future demand
- Section 6: Hockey - this section outlines the current picture for hockey and evaluates the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future demand
- Section 7: Rugby Union - this section outlines the current picture for rugby union and evaluates the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future demand
- Section 8 – Football - this section outlines the current picture for football and evaluates the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future demand
- Section 9 – Athletics – this section outlines the current picture for athletics and evaluates the adequacy of existing provision to meet current and projected future demand
- Section 10 – Indoor sports facilities – this section considers the adequacy of existing indoor sports facilities, including sports halls and swimming pools.

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2.0 Methodology

Introduction

2.1 The NPPF, currently through paragraph 103, states that;

'Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities (including quantitative or qualitative deficits or surpluses) and opportunities for new provision. Information gained from the assessments should be used to determine what open space, sport and recreational provision is needed, which plans should then seek to accommodate.'

2.2 Related to this, Paragraph 104 seeks to protect existing open space, sport and recreation facilities unless an assessment of need is undertaken that demonstrates how one of three criterion apply.

2.3 Guidance on the methodology required to produce an assessment of need and related strategies is provided by Sport England. Current guidance is contained within two documents, specifically;

- *Playing Pitch Guidance, An Approach to Developing and Delivering a Playing Pitch Strategy (Sport England 2013) and;*
- *Assessing Needs and Opportunities Guide for Indoor and Outdoor Sports Facilities (Sport England 2014) (ANOG).*

2.4 The Playing Pitch Guidance focuses exclusively on sports played on grass and artificial pitches (football, rugby, cricket, hockey) whilst ANOG is used to assess facilities for all other indoor and outdoor sports.

2.5 Sport England are currently in the process of updating these documents and it is anticipated that new guidance will be released circa June 2026. The new guidance will replace the two existing methodologies and will set out an overarching approach that will cover all sports.

2.6 Whilst the full content of the documents is not yet known, we have sought wherever possible to incorporate elements that are likely to be included within the revised guidance into the assessment of facilities within Darlington. To do this, we have received support from Sport England and relevant National Governing Bodies of Sport where appropriate.

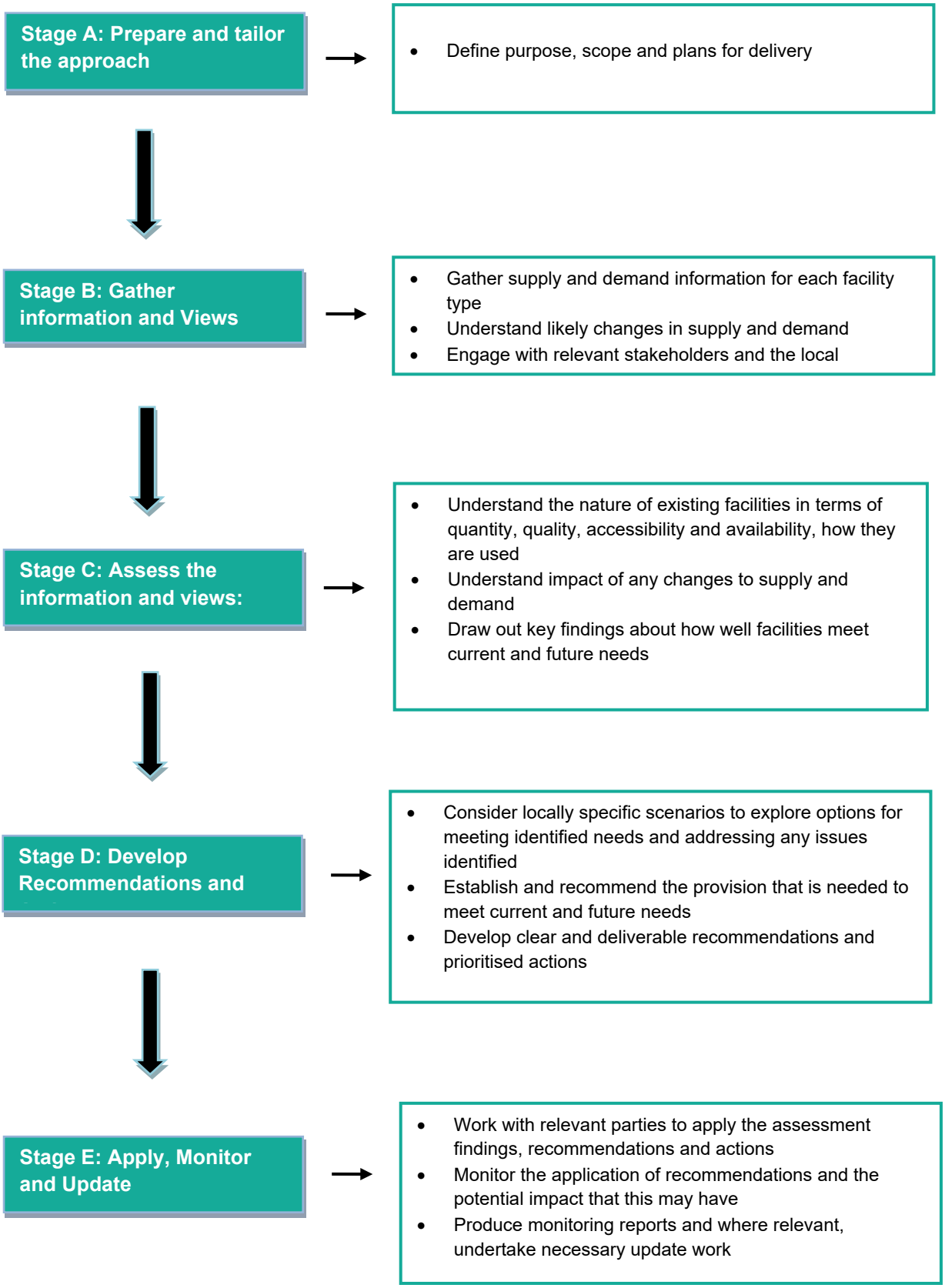
2.7 Whilst compliant with the existing methodology, this new SFS therefore seeks to embrace the principles of the new methodology and is structured to follow the five staged approach that will be advocated by the new methodology.

2.1 Figure 2.1 summarises the key steps of the new methodology, outlining the overarching structure for the development of a needs assessment.

2.8 This assessment report summarises the works undertaken in Stages A – C, whilst the strategy document (under separate cover) sets out Stages D and E.

2.9 The remainder of this section therefore outlines the work that has been undertaken under of the five steps of the new process.

Figure 2.1 – Five Staged Approach in the Creation of an Assessment of Need



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Stage A – Prepare and Tailor the approach

2.2 Darlington Borough Council has maintained strong relationships with members of the steering group through the ongoing monitoring of the previous SFS. The production of this updated document, which has been developed in partnership with Sport England and the relevant National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) therefore represents a continuation of this process.

2.3 The initial scope for the new strategy was determined by Darlington Borough Council and agreed with members of the steering group.

Sub Areas

2.4 The steering group determined that as in previous Sports facility Strategies for Darlington, patterns of facility usage, alongside the compact nature of the town mean that the adequacy of provision will be considered across the borough of Darlington as a whole. Accessibility and the location of each site within the town are however taken into account when evaluating the adequacy of provision, as well as during the strategy development and action planning process.

Future Population

2.5 Darlington Borough Council are currently in the process of reviewing their local plan. The plan has been prepared following the production of bespoke population projections that take into account the local circumstances for Darlington. These projections suggest that the population of the borough will increase to 120,217 by 2036.

2.6 These projections (extracted directly from Table 11 of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (available at sd09-shma-2017.pdf)) are set out in Table 2.1 and have been used in this assessment of sporting need to ensure consistency with the local plan. They predict a higher level of growth than the nationally prepared subnational population projections.

Table 2 – Bespoke Population Projections for Darlington BC (extracted from SHMA Table 11)

Age	2016			2036 10-years 2006-2016 Avg Household size			2036 20-years 1991-2011			2036 Unadjusted MYE rebased and adj 2016 pop		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Aged 0-4	3,280	3,070	**6,350**	3,432	3,311	**6,743**	3,201	3,317	**6,517**	3,425	3,305	**6,729**
Aged 5-9	3,390	3,312	**6,701**	3,443	3,325	**6,768**	3,217	3,332	**6,549**	3,437	3,318	**6,755**
Aged 10-14	3,242	2,970	**6,213**	3,465	3,366	**6,831**	3,268	3,364	**6,632**	3,459	3,360	**6,819**
Aged 15-19	3,001	3,021	**6,022**	3,321	3,221	**6,541**	3,138	3,237	**6,374**	3,316	3,216	**6,531**
Aged 20-24	2,937	2,959	**5,896**	3,004	3,117	**6,121**	3,020	2,916	**5,937**	2,999	3,111	**6,110**
Aged 25-29	3,157	3,431	**6,588**	3,581	3,711	**7,292**	3,587	3,471	**7,057**	3,574	3,703	**7,278**
Aged 30-34	3,360	3,483	**6,844**	3,409	3,405	**6,815**	3,284	3,296	**6,580**	3,403	3,398	**6,801**
Aged 35-39	3,327	3,342	**6,669**	3,519	3,532	**7,051**	3,405	3,398	**6,803**	3,512	3,525	**7,037**
Aged 40-44	3,361	3,562	**6,924**	3,758	3,770	**7,527**	3,650	3,637	**7,288**	3,751	3,763	**7,513**
Aged 45-49	3,837	3,946	**7,784**	3,613	3,758	**7,371**	3,662	3,510	**7,172**	3,607	3,753	**7,359**
Aged 50-54	3,979	4,026	**8,004**	3,440	3,637	**7,077**	3,561	3,356	**6,917**	3,435	3,633	**7,068**
Aged 55-59	3,433	3,682	**7,116**	3,214	3,409	**6,624**	3,350	3,147	**6,497**	3,210	3,406	**6,616**
Aged 60-64	3,029	3,050	**6,079**	3,180	3,482	**6,662**	3,429	3,124	**6,553**	3,177	3,478	**6,655**
Aged 65-69	3,081	3,282	**6,363**	3,518	3,796	**7,313**	3,744	3,464	**7,209**	3,515	3,793	**7,307**
Aged 70-74	2,385	2,500	**4,885**	3,435	3,728	**7,163**	3,685	3,391	**7,076**	3,432	3,725	**7,157**
Aged 75-79	1,770	2,140	**3,910**	2,744	3,165	**5,909**	3,133	2,714	**5,847**	2,742	3,163	**5,905**
Aged 80-84	1,238	1,643	**2,881**	2,028	2,392	**4,420**	2,370	2,009	**4,379**	2,027	2,391	**4,418**
Aged 85+	953	1,766	**2,719**	2,637	3,525	**6,162**	3,488	2,614	**6,102**	2,636	3,523	**6,158**
Total	**52,761**	**55,185**	**107,945**	**58,742**	**61,649**	**120,390**	**60,192**	**57,297**	**117,489**	**58,655**	**61,562**	**120,217**

2.7 Data relating to the current population is from the 2025 population projections based on the 2021 census data and modified by the 2019-based subnational population projections. Use of this data source ensures consistency with the information provided in the Sport England Playing Pitch Calculator.

2.8 This data source estimates the current population of Darlington to be 107,111. As a consequence, total population growth over the next 10 years is expected to equate to 13,106.

Housing Growth

2.9 The draft Local Plan review sets out a series of housing growth scenarios. It reports that housing will be delivered to meet a minimum requirement of 446 net additional dwellings over the plan period from 2025 to 2042 (which represents a slight reduction on the adopted plan). This results in a total net minimum requirement of 7582 dwellings.

2.10 The adopted Local Plan, as well as the Local Plan Review note that a large proportion of growth will focus on the existing main urban core of Darlington via sites within the main urban area and strategic extensions, as well as in neighbourhood areas.

2.11 The Plan provides detail on the proposed growth in specific neighbourhoods. Those with anticipated growth above 500 dwellings are;

- Middleton St George 742 houses
- Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent (1405 houses).

2.12 The adopted local plan also proposed significant growth in Hurworth (816 houses, adjusted to 364 in the Local Plan Review). Strategic extensions will be focused to the north east and west of the main urban area, with smaller scale extensions also proposed around the main urban fringe.

2.13 The Local Plan Review suggests that 3266 new dwellings will be delivered up to 2035 (the period covered by this strategy).

2.14 The Local Plan Review (now out for consultation) suggests that the following sites will accommodate greater than 400 dwellings up to 2036;

- West Park Garden Village (538). 90 additional dwellings also delivered on West Park Garden Village North up to 2036
- Burtree Garden Village (1170) 360 of which delivered after 2036
- Consicliffe Park South (475 total), 60 delivered after 2036
- Greater Faverdale (750), 1250 after 2036
- Coniscliffe Park North (930 total), 360 delivered after 2036
- Skerningham (1950), 900 of which are after 2036

2.15 The above represent a similar growth strategy to that set out in the current adopted local plan. The strategy document will consider the specific impact of the above key developments in order to provide guidance as to how decisions should be made to ensure that the needs arising from the new developments are addressed.

Consultation Process

2.16 Following agreement of the scope of works, detailed discussions were held with all key partners in order to tailor the approach that would be taken to stakeholder engagement, consultation and site audits, drawing upon the local knowledge and experience of how each sport is played in the Borough. We have also drawn on the strong foundations and evidence base available from previous strategies during the preparation of this document.

Stage B – Gather Information and Views

2.17 This phase of work includes the collection of data relating to both supply and demand for each facility type included within the scope of works.

Gathering Supply Data

2.18 Darlington Borough Council have a strong starting point as a full audit of facilities available was collected for the previous SFS and has been maintained as part of the monitoring process.

2.19 To ensure that the audit remains accurate and up to date, and reflects the current quality and availability of facilities, the following tasks have been undertaken;

- Review of existing data on Sport England Active Places tool
- Use of available technical quality assessment reports and Pitch Power data
- Non-technical site visits to both indoor and outdoor facilities
- Programme of consultation with schools offering community use
- Evaluation of site specific club views on quality, quantity and availability.
- Meetings with NGBs to discuss key issues and priorities.

2.20 It is important to emphasise that not all sports facilities offer the same level of access to the community. In line with guidance, sites are classified as follows;

- Sites are deemed to offer ***secured*** community use when they have;
    - A formal community use agreement

- A leasing or management agreement requiring pitches to be available to the community/ a community club
- A formal policy for community use adopted by the owner and or educational establishment
- Written confirmation from the owner and or educational establishment.

Which suggest that use is likely to continue for at least three years.

- Where community use is currently available, but does not meet the definitions above, this is listed as ***unsecured*** community use. Securing long term access to these facilities may emerge as a key priority

- ***No community use*** - facilities which as a matter of policy or practice are not available for hire or use by teams playing in community leagues.

2.21 All Local Authority managed provision is considered to be secure as part of the Council recreation offer. We have agreed classification of the remaining facilities with the steering group. Where concerns about accessibility / availability have been raised, these have been taken into account during the classification process.

2.22 As far as possible the assessment report aims to capture all playing pitches and sites providing sport and recreation facilities within Darlington Borough, there may however be instances where a site is omitted as it has not been identified at the time of the audit. Where pitches / sports facilities have not been recorded within the report they should still be classified as sport and recreation facilities / pitches and for planning purposes continue to be so. Furthermore, exclusion of a pitch or sports facility does not mean that it is not required from a supply and demand point of view. The strategy monitoring process will seek to ensure that the list of sites within the Borough is kept up to date as any omissions arise.

Disused Sites

2.23 In addition to the currently active sites identified within this SFS, it should be noted that playing field policy also covers disused sites. These may be important in terms of meeting current or future demand.

2.24 Sites that are classified as disused are not used at all by anyone and are not available for community hire either. Sites that were last used more than five years ago fall outside of Sport England's statutory remit but still have to be assessed using the criteria in paragraph 104 of the National Planning Policy Framework and Sport England would challenge a proposed loss of playing pitches/playing field which fails to meet such criteria.

2.25 Croft Working Mens Club is the only known disused site in Darlington, although there are also several sites where some pitches on the site are no longer used. These include Tommy Crooks Park and South Park.

Gathering Demand Data

2.26 A full assessment of need requires an understanding of the current levels of demand for each facility type, as well as a forecast of the likely future demand. We have also been able to compare the demand identified during the 2025 -2026 season with the demand recorded in previous versions of the SFS.

2.27 To evaluate current demand the following information was collated;

- Sports clubs and teams and their match and training requirements
- Casual and other demand
- Educational demand
- Displaced demand (i.e. teams wishing to play within the Borough but unable to)

- Latent demand
- Future demand (including club and team aspirations for development as well as National Governing Body priorities and targets)
- Population forecasts, which will impact on the likely number of participants (see earlier in this section).

2.28 To supplement the data collection exercise, as part of the Stage B work we have also sought to understand the views of relevant stakeholders on the facilities that are provided as well in relation to future priorities and plans. This work has included;

- A full programme of face to face, online meeting, telephone and online consultation with sports clubs
- Discussions with league secretaries
- Engagement with key providers, including DBC, Schools and private providers
- Engagement with relevant National Governing Bodies of Sport.

2.29 At least 80% of teams / clubs for each sport were represented in the consultation programme. For most of the sports involved, we have achieved 100% representation.

Stage C – Assess the Information and Views

2.30 Stage C seeks to understand;

- The nature of existing facilities, how they are used and the extent of any unmet demand
- The likely impact of any changes to supply and demand identified during Stage B
- How well existing facilities meet current needs and how the meet future needs.

2.31 In relation to playing fields, to answer the questions posed as part of Stage C, we have used the information collated in Stage B to undertake calculations in line with the guidance set out in the existing Playing Pitch Methodology. This takes into account the quality and availability of each site and compares the capacity available with the demand for this capacity.

2.32 This analysis enables us to;

- Understand the situation at individual sites
- Develop the current and projected future pictures for each sport; and
- Identify the key findings and issues that need to be addressed.

2.33 For other sports, we have used agreed parameters to evaluate the adequacy of provision and taken into account the views of local stakeholders. Analysis gives consideration to quality, quantity, accessibility and availability.

2.34 For swimming pools and sports halls, we also used the Sport England Facilities Planning Model (FPM). This model is supplied by Sport England and provides a detailed analysis of the adequacy of these facilities to meet current and projected future demand.

Stage D – Develop Recommendations and Actions

2.35 The separate strategy and action plan document will set out a strategic framework to address the issues identified in this assessment. Recommendations and priorities will be developed following extensive scenario testing and in conjunction with key stakeholders (both internal to the Council and external).

Stage E – Apply, Monitor and Update

2.36 The resulting action plan will be used to inform the delivery of the key priorities and to monitor the success of the strategy. Darlington Borough Council already has strong processes in place

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to monitor the implementation of the strategy and the steering group are committed to ensuring that this continues.

Summary

2.37 This assessment report summarises the key issues arising from the baseline work, which comprises Stages A to C of the Assessments of Needs Guidance. It informs the preparation of the strategy document (under separate cover), which covers Stages D and E. For each of the sports covered, it aims to;

- Outline the nature of the existing facilities and how they are used
- Identify any unmet demand
- Evaluate how well existing facilities meet current and projected future need
- Identify the key issues that the recommendations of the strategy document will need to address.

2.38 The strategy document will build on the issues identified and set out strategic priorities and actions for delivery. It will use scenario testing to determine the most appropriate course of action for each sport.

2.39 The remaining sections therefore evaluate the adequacy of provision on a sport by sport basis.

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3.0 Cricket

Introduction

3.1 This section assesses the adequacy of pitches for cricket. It includes;

- A brief overview of the supply and demand for cricket
- An understanding of activity at individual sites
- A picture of the adequacy of provision to meet current and projected future demand.

3.2 It covers Stages B and C of the Sport England methodology.

Gathering Supply Information

3.3 Table 3.1 summarises the cricket facilities in Darlington. It records six grass squares, which is consistent with supply recorded in both the 2015 and 2021 versions of the SFS.

3.4 Supporting the grass squares, there are two non turf pitches (NTPs), at Darlington Railway Athletic Cricket Club and Hummersknott Academy.

Table 3.1 – Cricket Provision in Darlington

Site Name	Ownership	Security of Tenure	Number of Grass Squares	Number of Wickets	NTP
Cockerton Cricket Club	Leased from Darlington Council	Secured Community Use	1	12	
Darlington Cricket Club	Owned by Club	Secured Community Use	1	23	
Darlington Railway Athletic Cricket Club	Site owned and managed by the multi sports club (of which the cricket section is a part)	Secured Community Use	1	15	1
Haughton Cricket Club	Site rented / leased from farmer on annual basis. Managed by club	Unsecured community use	1	8	
Middleton St George Cricket Club	Site owned and managed by multi sports club (of which the cricket section is a part)	Secured Community Use	1	12	
Rockcliffe Park Cricket Club	Leased from the Order of St John of God, circa 70 years remaining	Secured Community Use	1	13	
Hummersknott Academy	Education Site	Not available for community use	0	0	1

3.5 Table 3.1 demonstrates that all sites containing grass squares are available for community use. Whilst five of six clubs have long term tenure, Haughton CC continue to operate on an annual rental agreement and therefore have no long term security of tenure. This restricts the funding that can be secured, and also raises concerns about long term continuity of provision.

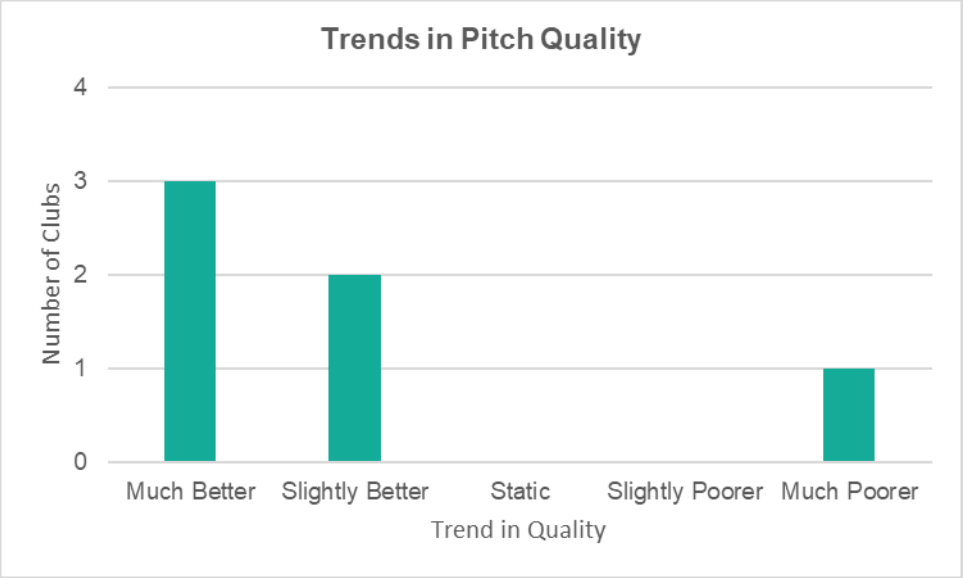
Grass Pitch Quality

3.6 The quality of club cricket grounds was evaluated through non technical site visits, technical site assessments / Pitch Power reports and club feedback. Final pitch quality ratings have been derived through the triangulation of data to provide an accurate picture of quality.

3.7 Consultation suggests that all clubs have invested in improvements to both pitch quality and ancillary provision since the previous PPS. Chart 3.1 reflects this, demonstrating that there is an overall perception that the quality of facilities is improving. Improved focus on maintenance and capital investment to address specific quality issues are the main reasons attributed to this.

3.8 Cockerton CC are the only responding club that have experienced a decline in quality. This has occurred because of the increased flooding on the site.

Chart 3.1 – Perceived Trends in Pitch Quality



3.9 Despite the enhancements made, all clubs identify a need for further works. Whilst at smaller clubs, ongoing improvement of the pitches was identified as crucial, at larger club bases upgraded ancillary facilities was prioritised. This responds to the increasing demand to accommodate female (and junior) cricket which requires adjustments and gender neutral changing accommodation.

3.10 Overall, the key messages arising from the analysis of quality are that;

- On the whole, squares are adequate and well maintained and suitable for the level of cricket that they are accommodating. The exception to this is Cockerton, which is frequently out of use due to standing water and requires investment if it is to remain functional. This site is located within an area of medium – high flood risk.
- The quality of outfields is more varying, with surfaces uneven in parts and some weeds evident. The levels of maintenance input vary, with strong maintenance procedures at the bigger clubs and budgets more restricted at clubs running fewer teams. Levels of maintenance input directly correlate with the overall quality of facility. Importantly, two of the six clubs note that they don't have any skilled / trained volunteers to carry out the required maintenance and some lack appropriate machinery /equipment.
- All of the clubs have functional pavilions, but some are now dated and restrict growth. At the larger clubs, improvements to sustainability are a priority, alongside maintaining appropriate facilities to accommodate cricket teams across all age groups and gender.

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- The quality and variety of training facilities is mixed - five of the six clubs identified improvement to training facilities amongst their key priorities.

3.11 Table 3.2 provides a summary of the quality issues identified on a site-specific basis (derived from a combination of site visits and consultation) and highlights where improvements are needed. It demonstrates that;

- Clubs running higher number of teams (including a range of junior and female teams) have better quality squares and outfields, good ancillary provision and a range of training facilities. Rockcliffe Park and Darlington CC fall into this category, with both grounds rated as good overall. Both sites are of sufficiently high quality for use by Durham Cricket Board representative teams.

- Whilst Darlington RA also have a junior section, quality and facilities at this site are notably more limited. The pavilion in particular requires investment and minimal training facilities are available. A recently completed PitchPower report also confirms that significant pitch improvement works are necessary at this site.

- The remaining three sites (Haughton CC, Middleton St George CC and Cockerton CC) offer more basic cricket facilities – ground quality is lower, ancillary facilities are restricted and few training facilities are provided. Despite the more restricted provision, these grounds still provide functional cricket grounds supporting grass roots cricket

3.12 It should be noted that in many instances, outfield and square issues can be improved by tailored maintenance programmes rather than costly interventions such as drainage installation. This will be explored further in the strategy document, but any capital investment should be preceded by detailed grounds maintenance and pitch condition reports (PitchPower) in order to determine the best approach to addressing the issues identified.

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Table 3.2 – Site Specific Quality Comments

Site Name	Pitch Quality Rating	Wicket / Outfield	Training Facilities	Pavilion	Key Priorities
Cockerton Cricket Club	Poor to standard	Small ground, basic square and outfield with white lined boundary. The ground suffers from extremely poor drainage and extensive flooding which creates standing water. This has worsened. Outfield uneven as a result. Club lacks storage for equipment and therefore does not have appropriate machinery for maintenance. This might also impact on the quality issues experienced – ie limited maintenance can worsen drainage concerns.	Club use two grass wickets with mobile batting cage.	Small pavilion in good condition. Recent investment into kitchen facilities and extension of changing rooms. Basic container for storage is insufficient. Pavilion extension required particular to support additional storge.	• Improved maintenance (will require machinery) • Drainage works (if required following improved maintenance) • Pavilion extension
Darlington Cricket Club	Good	Surrounded by housing on most sides, club protected by netting. Excellent quality site, square recently relayed. Both outfield and square are even. Large square with evidence of reseeding, junior / training wickets available towards the outer perimeter of pitch.. Well maintained but heavy usage is evident (outfield and square).	2 artificial practice lanes, 2 mobile lanes. No NTP on field. The current all weather training nets are restricted under a planning application limiting their use. Club require additional training options and wish to convert small wickets on square to artificial to support training.	Excellent quality, large pavilion with bar and function room. Spectator seating available. Club seeking to improve sustainability through solar panels, EV chargers, small wind turbine etc. Would benefit from investment into sustainability.	• Conversion of wickets to improve training facilities • Changing facilities • Investment into sustainability of clubhouse.
Darlington Railway Athletic Cricket Club	Standard	Important multi sport site but appears tired. Grass coverage on outfield limited in parts. Damage to surface evident - – wear and tear and some vehicle marks . Outfield used for football in winter and is uneven. Weeds and some of the ryegrass was going to seed - some fairy ring on site. Site would benefit from better turf management / investment into verticutter to support	Two mobile training nets, NTP on square. Occasional training use of grass wickets on square. Club indicate that permanent non turf practice nets would be of benefit.	Large social club which is over 100 years old and would benefit from update and investment. Changing facilities are small.	• Pitch improvement works (and purchase of associated machinery) • Investment into pavilion, improvements • Provision of permanent non turf practice nets.

Site Name	Pitch Quality Rating	Wicket / Outfield	Training Facilities	Pavilion	Key Priorities
		ground preparation . Pitch Power assessment and site visits both confirm quality to be basic. Key priorities identified as fraise mowing and vertidraining. Some amendments to equipment required. Potential to link with other sports in the Club to share equipment.			
Haughton Cricket Club	Standard	Rural environment. Basic square and outfield, limited grass coverage on part of outfield and very uneven in parts. Functional.	Mobile training nets, requires improved training facilities including permanent net facility.	Small basic pavilion that is in very poor condition.	• Upgrade to pavilion. • Permanent training nets. • Note that lack of long term lease makes improvement at this site challenging.
Middleton St George Cricket Club	Standard to poor	Basic playing facilities, wear and tear evident on the square. Outfield would benefit from additional turf maintenance - demonstrating weeds, rye grass seeding. Recent issues with sewer management on site. Club report that ongoing pitch improvements remain key priority	Mobile training net. No off square training facilities	Pavilion is dated but functional.	• Playing facilities upgrade – improved focus on maintenance • training facilities – Non turf practice facility.
Rockcliffe Park Cricket Club	Good	Strong club site with good playing facilities. Well maintained – both square and outfield are good. Outfield recently levelled and recent investment in ground machinery has improved maintenance.	2 bay practice nets installed 2024. Club require turf practice facilities away from main square	Good pavilion which has benefitted from recent modifications. Work on additional changing room winter 2025, delivery of further additional changing room remains a priority. Further works to improve pavilion sustainability. Parking is ash. Outdoor seating area and patio recently provided. Site also includes new groundkeepers shed	• Further extension to pavilion • Sustainability works. • Turf practice facilities,

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Demand

Club Based Demand

3.13 The 2021 assessment identified 16 adult teams and 8 junior teams. There were also 8 teams playing in friendly matches.

3.14 Since 2021, participation has grown significantly. There are now 16 senior male teams, 4 adult female teams and 14 junior teams, as well as 6 midweek teams. This means that since 2021;

- Adult male cricket has remained static
- There has been significant growth in female cricket as there were no female teams in 2021. There are now two teams (one hardball and one softball) at Rockcliffe Park and one team at both Darlington RA and Darlington CC. Rockcliffe Park CC is now also running a junior female team (u12)
- Participation in junior cricket has almost doubled, with 14 teams now playing (compared to 8)
- The amount of midweek league teams based in Darlington has declined very slightly.

3.15 Table 3.2 summarises the number of teams in each club and the total demand across Darlington (2025 season).

Table 3.2 – Demand for Cricket in Darlington

Club Name	Adult Male Teams	Adult Female Teams	Midweek	Junior Male Teams	Junior Female Teams	Leagues	Venue
Cockerton Cricket Club	2		0			Darlington & District	Cockerton Cricket Club
Darlington Cricket Club	3	1		4 (U17/U15/U13/U11)		NYSD / NYACC	Darlington Cricket Club
Darlington Railway Athletic Cricket Club	3	1	1 (Darlington RA Tetley Corner)	3 (U11/U12/U13)		NYSD / NYACC / NE Social League	Darlington Railway Athletic Cricket Club
Haughton Cricket Club	2					Darlington & District	Haughton Cricket Club
Middleton St George Cricket Club	2					Darlington & District	Middleton St George Cricket Club
Rockcliffe Park Cricket Club	4 (including Masters Over 40)	2		7 (U19 / U17 / U15 / U13/ U12 / U11 / U11 development)	1 (U12)	NYSD, NYACC	Rockcliffe Park Cricket Club
Midweek Social Clubs							
Hurworth Gents			1			NE Social League	Rockliffe Park CC
SG Petch Social			1			NE Social League	MSG CC
Elliot Containers Social			1			NE Social League	MSG CC

Club Name	Adult Male Teams	Adult Female Teams	Midweek	Junior Male Teams	Junior Female Teams	Leagues	Venue
Spin Doctors CC			1			NE Social League	Various around Darlington
Gudivers CC			1			NE Social League	Various around Darlington
Total	**16**	**4**	**6**	**14**	**1**		

3.16 Table 3.2 confirms that there is a strong network of sustainable clubs in the Borough, supplemented by a series of single team social clubs. Rockcliffe Park CC, Darlington CC and Darlington RA all offer multiple senior sides as well as growing female and junior sections. Darlington RA are part of a much wider multi-sport site, with football and bowls (amongst several other sports) also played. Whilst Cockerton CC, Middleton George CC and Haughton CC are smaller clubs running just senior cricket, they all continue to field two teams.

3.17 There are five single team social clubs playing in the midweek cricket league, two of which are based at club sites and two of which use a variety of venues across Darlington (rotating). Darlington RA also field a midweek side.

3.18 Overall therefore, demand has increased significantly since the 2021 strategy. Despite this, there is no concrete evidence of existing latent or displaced demand in Darlington currently.

Other Demand

3.19 At each site, the majority of demand on the square arises from use for match play by the home club. At some sites however additional usage takes place, in particular by teams playing in the midweek cricket league. Middleton St George CC, Rockcliffe Park CC in particular are important venues for midweek league cricket.

3.20 Darlington CC and Rockcliffe Park CC are also used for League and cup finals and for representative matches by Durham County. This reflects the high quality of facilities that are available on these grounds. Each ground hosts a small number of these matches per season.

3.21 Outside of the above and the club's own match play activity, the only other regular usage of the square is for training. Middleton St George CC, Haughton CC and Cockerton CC have no off square training nets and consequently all training sessions take place on the square. Despite off field nets and / or NTP provision, at least one session per week also takes place on the grass square at Darlington CC, Rockcliffe Park CC and Darlington RA. This activity all places additional demands on the squares.

3.22 Rockcliffe Park, Darlington CC and Darlington Railway CC all engage with ECB programmes including All Stars and Dynamos. This activity adds further wear and tear, although this is typically focused on the outfield rather than the square itself.

Training Needs

3.23 The ECB highlight the importance of clubs having access to appropriate training facilities – this is particularly important for clubs trying to grow / sustain junior sections, as juniors tend to gravitate towards high quality training facilities and a developmental environment. A lack of off field training facilities can also restrict the amount of development activities that can take place, as youth training / implementation of All Stars programmes etc starts to conflict with space required for older age group training.

3.24 Consultation demonstrated that access to appropriate training facilities is one of the key issues for clubs, with five out of six clubs (excluding Rockcliffe Park) identifying improvement to training facilities as one of their key priorities.

3.25 In the summer, clubs train predominantly at their home ground. As highlighted earlier in this section, training facilities at club sites are varying. Whilst larger clubs have permanent artificial net facilities, Cockerton CC, Haughton CC and Middleton George CC have only mobile net cages that are used over the square. This not only impacts on the wear and tear of the square, but also reduces the ability of the club to schedule other activities, for example junior training. Reflecting the growth in cricket, even the clubs with good training provision indicate that they require further facilities.

3.26 During the winter months, clubs primarily use indoor training nets / sports halls. Longfield Academy, Hurworth School, Darlington Education Village and Hummersknott School all offer cricket nets as part of their sports hall provision. Planning permission has also been granted for a new multi-sport facility on the Faverdale Industrial Estate, which is anticipated to include cricket nets.

3.27 Consultation suggests that some clubs currently travel outside of the borough to reach indoor training provision, using ML Sports and Fitness (Richmond) and Sedgefield School (Sedgefield). This suggests that additional capacity may still be required.

3.28 Whilst it was acknowledged during consultation that several sites contain indoor cricket nets, it was highlighted that actually accessing the relevant facilities is a challenge due to competing demands for use of the sports halls with football. This is likely to be the reason that clubs continue to travel outside of Darlington to find appropriate facilities. The ongoing heavy use of indoor facilities by football is highlighted later in this assessment in relation to sports hall provision.

Schools Cricket

3.29 Demand for formal cricket pitches is much less evident from the education sector than other sports. The Chance to Shine programme, which is delivered at some schools in Darlington by Durham CC in partnership with Darlington CC, seeks to attract young people to cricket at an early age. This programme has successfully been delivered in Darlington in recent years and is likely to have contributed to the participation growth that has been achieved. It takes place predominantly at the primary school site on the playground.

3.30 None of the secondary schools have their own grass squares and so participation in secondary schools is more limited. Only Hummersknott School has an artificial cricket wicket. Any organised cricket matches therefore take place off site - Darlington CC accommodates an annual school festival. This lack of engagement at a school level means attracting young people to cricket is more challenging.

Adequacy of Provision

3.31 The adequacy of facilities for cricket is measured by comparing the number of wickets available against the level of use of these wickets. This is considered firstly at a site-specific level and then compiled to present a Borough-wide picture.

3.32 For cricket, unlike other pitch sports, the capacity of a pitch is measured on a seasonal basis (as opposed to weekly) and is primarily determined by the number and quality of wickets on a pitch. Play is rotated throughout the season across the wickets to reduce wear and allow for repair. Consideration is however also given to the availability of facilities at peak time.

3.33 With regards capacity, as a guide, the ECB suggests that a good quality wicket should be able to take;

- 5 matches per season per grass wicket (adults)
- 7 matches per season per grass wicket (juniors)
- 60 matches per season per non-turf wicket (adults); and
- 80 matches per season per non-turf wicket (juniors).

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3.34 For sites where the condition of the wicket is poorer, the amount of games that can be sustained without impact on the condition of the facility is lower. Standard quality wickets are able to sustain 4 adult games (5 junior) per season, whilst poor facilities should not be considered to offer any capacity for health and safety reasons. None of the facilities in Darlington are currently classified as poor, although there are concerns about the ground at Cockerton CC longer term which will quickly become poor if flooding issues are not addressed.

3.35 For the purposes of calculations, demand is therefore measured in terms of the number of home games that each team will play per season. It is acknowledged that this is approximate (as fixtures can be cancelled, and progress in cup competitions for example is different each season).

3.36 Calculations summarising the adequacy of facilities for cricket at each site are summarised in Table 3.4, which contains the following information;

- Number of wickets required to accommodate adult play (based upon number of games each adult team plays and assumption of wicket capacity where good wickets can take 5 games and standard wickets can sustain 4 games)
- Number of wickets required to accommodate junior play (based upon number of games each adult team plays and assumption of wicket capacity where good wickets can take 7 games and standard wickets can sustain 5 games)
- Total number of wickets required to meet demand
- Spare capacity (i.e. capacity of adult wickets on each site minus demand from adult teams, likewise for junior teams) and the potential additional MES that could be accommodated.

3.37 Figures with a '–' indicate that the wickets are overplayed i.e. demand is greater than supply. Calculations assume that all match play takes place on grass wickets, which reflects the feedback provided during consultation and is also a consequence of the limited availability of on field non turf wickets.

3.38 Table 3.3 indicates that given the increases in participation that have taken place since the 2021 SFS, supply is now more constrained. The site specific overviews suggest that;

- As in 2021, there is slight overplay at Rockcliffe Park and Haughton Cricket Club . Like in 2021, the overplay at Rockcliffe Park can be attributed to high levels of demand (and overplay has increased since 2021), while the overplay at Haughton CC results from the site offering only a small square of standard quality that is used for both match play and training
- Overplay also now exists at Darlington Railway Cricket Club. This has arisen due to increasing junior participation since 2021, whilst senior cricket has remained static. Although there is a non turf wicket on the square to accommodate training, this is not currently used for match play.
- All other sites (Darlington CC / Middleton St George CC and Cockerton CC) are able to sustain more play, although there is limited scope for extensive growth at any club. Darlington CC have a very large square and have capacity available to accommodate a small amount of additional play, despite the high number of teams that they already run. When taking into account training demand, plus the use of grounds by other teams, there is very little remaining capacity at the other two grounds, primarily as a result of clubs having smaller squares. This means that any additional teams at Middleton St George may start to generate overplay, but some junior activity could be accommodated at Cockerton CC
- There is no remaining spare capacity for adult cricket on a Saturday at any site. Darlington CC, Darlington RA and Rockcliffe Park all run more than two adult male teams and consequently also require access to the grounds on a Sunday for senior cricket. This means that pressures for pitch access are continuing to grow - female teams and youth fixtures are competing with male teams that are also playing on Sundays. Growing junior sections

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are also generating increased use of the squares midweek, which starts to overlap with senior training sessions.

3.39 It is clear therefore that the existing infrastructure is only just able to sustain demand at most sites, and at Rockcliffe Park, Haughton CC and Darlington RA, demand is already exceeding the recommend levels of use on the square.

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Table 3.4 – Adequacy of Cricket Pitch Provision across Darlington

Site Name	Quality Rating (Club View)	number of wickets (Natural)	Number of Games (Senior)	Number of Games (Junior)	Wickets Required (Adult)	Wickets Required (Junior)	Total Wickets Required (Club Matchplay)	Other Demand (number of additional matches and training)	Total Demand (wickets)	Supply / Demand Position	Peak Time Position
Rockliffe Park	Good	13	60	48	12	7	18	15	22	-9	0
Darlington CC	Good	23	55	24	11	4	15	32	21	2	0
Darlington Railway Athletic CC	Standard	15	49	18	12	3	15	2	15	0	0
Cockerton CC	Standard	12	28	0	7	0	7	14	11	1	0
Middleton St George Cricket Club	Standard	12	28	0	7	0	7	14	11	1	0
Haughton Cricket Club	Standard	8	28	0	7	0	7	12	10	-2	0

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3.40 The site overviews set out in Table 3.3 can be used to develop an overall picture of provision across the Borough as a whole. This is set out in Table 3.4.

3.41 Reflecting the site specific analysis which demonstrated that most sites are heavily used and identified some overplay, when considering all sites together, Table 3.4 reveals that overall, there is no remaining spare capacity for cricket in Darlington. The amount of overplay that is evident (11) exceeds the amount of spare capacity (4) that is available at other grounds. This reflects the increase in participation that has taken place since the 2021 SFS, when a small amount of spare capacity (10 MES) was identified.

3.42 Added to this, Table 3.5 also confirms that there is no spare capacity for additional play on a Saturday afternoon, which is peak time for adult cricket.

Table 3.5 - Boroughwide Picture of Provision

Total Demand (Number of Strips)	Total Supply (Number of Strips)	Spare Capacity Weekly	Spare Capacity at Peak Time (Saturday PM)
90	83	7	0

Future Picture

3.43 As demonstrated, the existing infrastructure for cricket is already not able to meet current demand. Significant increases in participation have taken place since the previous strategy was developed and as engagement with cricket continues to grow, it is likely that the position will worsen.

3.44 That said, overplay is currently concentrated at two grounds. At Rockcliffe Park it arises because of the high volume of cricket that is played on a square that is only of standard size, whilst at Haughton CC is occurs because the square is small and is also used for training. There is also no remaining spare capacity at Darlington RA. Indeed, there is very little spare capacity at any site, and significant growth at any club would generate overplay at that site.

3.45 Population growth, as well as the ongoing successful implementation of cricket development initiatives will impact upon future demand. These issues are considered in turn in order to understand how facility requirements will change.

Population Change

3.46 Team Generation Rates (TGRs) indicate how many people in a specified age group are required to generate one team. By applying TGRs to population projections, we can project the theoretical number of teams that would be generated from population growth and gain an understanding of future demand.

3.47 Table 3.6 summarises the potential impact of the projected population growth for cricket. It reveals that an additional 45 match equivalent sessions will be generated across the season.

Table 3.6 - Impact of Changes to the Population Profile

Sport	% of the population in each sport age group	Estimated number of people from the new population in age group	Existing team generation rate	Estimated number of teams generated by the new population	Estimated number of home matches per season for new population
Cricket Open Age Men (18-55)	21.46%	2,813.6	1,056	2.66	26.64
Cricket Open Age Women's (18-55yrs)	22.49%	2,947.9	6,085	0.48	4.84
Cricket Junior Boys (7-18yrs)	6.81%	892.19	562	1.59	12.71
Cricket Junior Girls (7-18yrs)	6.72%	880.63	7,784	0.11	0.91

3.48 As Table 3.4 has reported that there is only capacity for 7 additional matches across the whole borough currently (and none at peak time), this level of additional demand cannot be accommodated without the creation of additional capacity.

3.49 Without taking into account any potential demand that is generated from participation increases, unmet demand will therefore equate to at least 40 matches (circa 1 pitch).

Driving Growth in Cricket – Impact on Pitches

3.50 Durham Cricket Board serves as the governing and representative body for cricket across Durham. The Cricket Board works with a variety of partners to promote the development of cricket and is now working alongside the ECB to deliver the national three-year plan, Inspiring Generations (2025 – 2028).

3.51 The plan seeks to inspire current and future generations through cricket and highlights a number of recent successes, including;

- Over 2.5 million players at the grassroots level each year
- Over 20,000 women and girls fixtures in 2023
- Increase of 13,200 junior teams from 2021

3.52 This success is believed to provide a strong platform to deliver the strategy. The plan sets six clear priorities for growing cricket and outlines the key mechanisms for the delivery of these objectives. It is hoped that the successful delivery of the strategy will stimulate further growth in cricket.

3.53 The key objectives of the strategy are summarised in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7 - Key Objectives of Inspiring Generations (ECB 2025)

Objectives	Key Delivery Mechanisms
Make Cricket Diverse and Inclusive	• Ensure cricket's culture is welcoming to all • Strive for diverse representation in every part of the game • Remove barriers for aspiring cricketers of all backgrounds • Tackle discrimination and inequalities
Transform women and girls cricket	• Grow the visibility of women's professional cricket • Grow the appeal of women's professional cricket • Progress towards a commercially viable women's game • Grow the number of clubs with a girls' section

Objectives	Key Delivery Mechanisms
Connect communities through play	• Develop a participant centred club & league network • Provide access to young people who are missing out • Engage and support ethnically diverse communities • Leverage the impact of cricket through Trusts and Foundations and charity partners
Inspire through winning England teams	• Entertain fans through a positive brand of England cricket • Win the big series and events • Support talent pathways to produce future England stars
Thriving and Sustainable Women's game	• Make The Hundred the #1 challenger to the IPL • Grow audiences through high quality domestic competitions • Foster effective player pathways in all formats • Support high performing & financially sustainable clubs • Deliver the domestic & international season
Win the battle for attention	• Continue to deliver the "Road to 4m" attendees • Get more people watching cricket more often on TV • Grow the marketable UK digital audience to 2m

3.54 While some of the above targets may not result directly in increased participation, and some of the development initiatives may not immediately generate a direct requirement for additional capacity, longer term, if new participants successfully transition into the full game, it is likely that there will be greater demand for cricket pitches in years to come.

3.55 Consultation with Durham Cricket Board demonstrates that the recent growth experienced in Darlington is reflected across the county as a whole. Durham continues to experience increasing demand, particularly for senior female cricket and in youth cricket.

3.56 As demonstrated above in Table 3.7, Transforming Women and Girls Cricket is one of the key priorities of the ECB and one that has gained significant traction in recent years. There is a particular focus on the development of women and girls cricket and funding is now available for clubs that are delivering a women and girls programme.

3.57 The development of women and girls cricket in particular however brings specific facility pressures, with the increased usage putting extra demands on already busy site schedules and programmes. There are also pressures on ancillary provision, with a need to ensure that facilities can cater for both genders, as well as both adult and senior cricket.

3.58 With a successful club structure already in place and engagement with ECB initiatives evident, ongoing increases in participation through the development work led by clubs is perhaps the most likely source of additional cricket demand.

3.59 Crucially, three of the clubs in Darlington are members of the North Yorkshire and South Durham Cricket League Premier League / Division 1, where there are criteria requiring clubs to manage and promote women and girls cricket (as well as to support male senior and junior cricket). This ensures that development will take place in Darlington, and consequently it is critical that this is planned for.

3.60 Reflecting this, consultation with clubs demonstrates that despite the capacity pressures that are evident, four of the clubs in Darlington continue to place significant focus on the further development of women, girls and junior cricket. As the development initiatives generate new players, this then in turn places greater pressures on the existing facilities to accommodate this demand – both in terms of pitches to play on, but also the ancillary facilities that accompany the pitches.

3.61 Table 3.8 summarises the growth aspirations of clubs and comments upon whether these can be achieved within their existing site infrastructure. It is clear that even where clubs are already at capacity, there are still aspirations for growth. This means that the creation of additional capacity to accommodate future demand will be critical if participation is not to be stifled. As

well as new provision, this can be delivered in a variety of ways, including for example, qualitative improvements to standard quality facilities, the provision of non turf wickets, creation of additional training facilities and ground share.

Table 3.8 – Club Growth Aspirations

Club	Current Position	Growth Aspirations	Future Capacity Issues	Other Issues
Cockerton Cricket Club	Spare capacity of 2 wickets (circa 10 matches)	Extra male team, female team. Longer term development of junior section	Capacity to accommodate initial increase in participation. Longer term creation of junior section will place further pressures on square	• Requires works to pitch to ensure ongoing functionality of site • Lack of off field training facilities • Pavilion is limited and may potentially inhibit growth of junior / female section
Darlington Cricket Club	Spare capacity of 2 wickets (circa 10 matches)	Girls team	Increased requirement – new girls team	• Lack of capacity for growth despite large square • Club highlight potential to convert two wickets on edge of square to non turf – this would increase capacity and improve training opportunities • Pavilion requires investment • Additional training facilities also required
Darlington Railway Athletic Cricket Club	Played to level site can sustain – no remaining capacity	Mens social team, u12 boys team, womens softball team	Overplay generated if additional teams are created.	• Significant multi-sport site with strong opportunities for further growth. Acitvity now inhibited by poor quality of facilities (across all sports) • Lack of capacity for growth. • Pitch requires investment and improvement works • Pavilion in poor condition and likely to limit growth of female / junior section • Permanent practice nets would support off square training
Haughton Cricket Club	Demand for an additional 2 strips	None	Lack of growth ambitions, but located in an area of potential housing growth, which could see additional players join. Existing facilities mean that	• Lease of facility is a concern – no long term security of tenure • Poor pavilion • Lack of training nets

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Club	Current Position	Growth Aspirations	Future Capacity Issues	Other Issues
			there is no capacity for further play.	
Middleton St George Cricket Club	Played to level site can sustain – no remaining capacity	None	Lack of growth ambitions	• Playing facilities would benefit from upgrade • Club have no off field training facilities –
Rockcliffe Park Cricket Club	Demand for an additional 9 strips (45 matches)	Female hard ball team, girls hard ball team	Club is already at capacity – additional participation will further increase overplay	• Additional capacity required, but no opportunity to extend square • Further works required to ancillary provision to ensure club is able to balance junior and female participation • Potential to introduce non turf wicket to address capacity issues and improve training provision • Potential requirement for partnership with a club that has capacity.

3.62 Table 3.8 therefore demonstrates that there are particular challenges meeting growth aspirations at all sites that currently offer junior and female cricket (Rockcliffe Park / Darlington CC and Darlington Railway Athletic CC). The rapid growth of girls and womens cricket means that it is at these sites where additional demand is very likely to be created, but as demonstrated, capacity at all of these sites is already restricted. Added to this, improvements are required to ensure that ancillary facilities are able to meet the needs of all different players.

3.63 In addition to the figures presented in Table 3.7, which consider the achievement of just club aspirations, it is noted that Table 3.6 suggests that population growth will generate demand for another 45 matches (or circa 1 pitch).

3.64 Borough wide, it is clear that demand will outstrip supply and that additional capacity will be required. There is already no scope to increase participation in the men's game on a Saturday, and scheduling for female and junior cricket is already at capacity. Growth will see this exacerbated.

Summary – Key Issues for Cricket

3.65 The key issues that need to be addressed in relation to cricket in Darlington are therefore summarised overleaf.

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Summary – Key Issues for Cricket In Darlington

Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• There are six grass cricket squares, the same position as in 2021 • All cricket grounds offer security of tenure except Haughton CC, which is leased annually from a local farmer • Almost no facilities for cricket on the school estate • There is evidence of significant investment in cricket since the 2021 SFS at all grounds. All sites are functional and quality is good at both Darlington CC and Rockcliffe Park. There remain opportunities to improve both of these sites further, but also to address quality issues at other clubs. • All clubs identify further improvement works as being required– for 50%, these focus on the pitch. Levels of maintenance input clearly correlates with pitch quality. Lack of skilled maintenance staff is an issue at 1/3 of clubs • Ancillary facilities is priority at larger clubs, with participation growth impacted by the availability of appropriate facilities for new players • Lack of / poor training facilities evident at several sites – 5/6 clubs identify training facility improvements amongst their key priorities.	• Haughton CC – upgrade to pavilion, permanent training nets required, long term lease for facility • Middleton St George CC – upgrade to existing playing fields through improved maintenance, installation of non turf practice facility • Rockcliffe Park Cricket Club – further extension to pavilion, works to improve sustainability. Turf practice facilities are a longer term aspiration • Cockerton CC – improved maintenance, drainage works and pavilion extension • Darlington CC – conversion of wickets to improve training opportunities, improvement to changing facilities and investment into clubhouses • Darlington RA – improvement of pitch maintenance (requires machinery), investment into pavilion, provision of non turf practice nets.
Demand	• Whilst adult male cricket is static, there has been significant growth in female cricket and participation in junior cricket has almost doubled. • The midweek cricket league has continued to decline • Three larger clubs have strong and very sustainable junior sections, growth in female cricket also supported. These clubs are also engaging with ECB development programmes • Larger sites also used to support representative cricket – adds to wear and tear on the square • All clubs run at least one weekly training session on the grass square. Cockerton CC, Haughton CC, MSG have mobile net cages, but no other training facilities • Greater variety of training provision at other sites, but Darlington CC looking to convert grass wickets to artificial and both other sites require	• Lack of junior sections at village clubs impacts on sustainability • Lack of training facilities means that demand is not met • Competition for indoor cricket nets from other sports

	further off field nets • Winter training takes place primarily in Darlington (Hurworth School, Longfield Academy, Education Village and Hummersknott), but clubs also travel to ML Sports (Richmond) and Sedgefield School (Sedgefield). Lack of availability in sports halls due to competing demands with football is identified as key issue	
Adequacy of Provision	• All active grass pitches are used regularly during the cricket season • There is slight overplay at both Rockcliffe Park and Haughton Cricket Club. The overplay at Rockcliffe Park can be attributed to high levels of demand, while the overplay at Haughton CC results from a small square (and usage of the facility by friendly teams as well as the cricket clubs own two teams) • There is also a small amount of overplay at Darlington RA which arises because of increasing participation • All other sites are able to sustain more play, although there is limited scope for extensive growth at any club. Only Cockerton CC actually has any spare capacity for an additional team • There is no spare capacity on a Saturday, and pressures for pitch access are also now starting to build on Sundays with youth fixtures competing with additional male teams playing due to lack of spare capacity on Saturdays • Boroughwide, there is no remaining spare capacity • Population growth is likely to generate demand equivalent to one additional cricket pitch (46 matches) – this level of demand cannot be met by the existing infrastructure, given the pressures that are already evident • All of the larger clubs, as well as Cockerton CC have growth aspirations which cannot be met by the existing infrastructure.	• Pitch quality is impacting capacity at Darlington RA, Haughton CC, Middleton St George and Cockerton CC • There are also quality issues at other sites which impact upon player capacity and capacity to accommodate onsite training • There is no remaining spare capacity at peak time in the Borough – this limits the growth of the male game • Unmet demand is now evident across the borough as a whole Female and junior cricket continues to grow, but appropriate ancillary facilities are required to support this.
Key Issues for Strategy to address	• There is a need to support long term access to facilities – existing sites require protection and access to Haughton CC will need to be secured • There is no spare capacity in the existing pitch stock and no spare capacity at peak time - there is therefore a need for additional capacity • The quality of pitches is impacting capacity on some sites and this needs to be addressed – these sites are Darlington RA, Haughton CC, Middleton St George and Cockerton CC • There are also quality issues at other sites which impact upon player capacity and capacity to accommodate onsite training – qualitative improvements need to be prioritised - Darlington RA, Haughton CC, Middleton St George and Cockerton CC • Training facilities are also highlighted as an issue for almost every club. Key priorities include Rockcliffe Park, Middleton St George, Haughton CC,	

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	non turf at Cockerton CC, Darlington CC • Population growth is likely to generate demand for an additional cricket pitch – this level of demand cannot be met within the existing infrastructure

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4.0 Tennis and Padel

Introduction

4.1 This section assesses the adequacy of facilities for both tennis and padel by presenting an overview of supply (quantity, quality, accessibility and availability) and demand. The key findings are then summarised, alongside the issues to be addressed.

Gathering Supply Data

4.2 An audit of provision for tennis and padel across Darlington Borough identifies;

- 45 tennis courts
- 12 padel courts (7 of which are indoor).

4.3 This represents an increase on the position identified in the 2021 SFS. This has occurred primarily as a result of the creation of new padel courts, but also because a further site containing tennis courts has been identified. The court at Carmel College is however no longer functional for tennis – this is now used as a car park.

4.4 Table 4.1 summarises the spread of tennis courts across by facility type while Table 4.2 provides site specific detail on the facilities that are available.

Table 4.1 – Type of Tennis Courts in Darlington

Type of Site	Number of Sites	Total Number of Courts	Number of Floodlit Courts	Courts Available for Community Use
Club	2	9	4	9
Park	3	7	0	7
School	7	26	8	19
Commercial	2	3	1	3
Total	14	45	13	38

4.5 Table 4.1 demonstrates that the education section is the highest provider of courts, although not all available facilities are open for community use. There are 19 courts on school premises that are currently accessible to the public. In addition to the above, Skerne Park Academy advertises that it has tennis markings on its astroturf and that this could be hired if required.

4.6 Nine courts are provided across two club sites (Wellfield Tennis Club and New Blackwell Tennis Club), whilst 7 courts are park based facilities (Stanhope Park, The Denes and South Park). All of these are available for use.

4.7 In addition to the stock of tennis courts, there are three sites currently containing padel courts;

- Blackwell Meadows Padel – 4 courts
- Rockcliffe Park Hotel – 1 padel court recently created from the conversion of a tennis court
- Pure Padel (off Haughton Road)– 7 indoor padel courts

Quality

4.8 The quality of tennis courts was assessed through site visits (using a non-technical site assessment matrix) as well as via consultation with the clubs and providers. In general, these

assessments conclude that there is a hierarchy of provision, with club facilities of a much higher standard than other courts.

4.9 In general;

- *Public Facilities* – there is significant potential to improve the quality of parks courts. Facilities at all sites are poor, with improvements to the surface and fencing required. Notably, at each of the parks sites, one court was not set up for tennis (no nets) meaning that the actual courts provided are lower than the potential number of facilities
- *Club Provision* – is generally good, with clear markings and good surfaces at both club bases. At both sites floodlighting (either improved or new) is identified as the priority.
- *Education Facilities* – are primarily standard multi use tarmac courts that are overmarked with netball lines. All courts on educational premises are functional.

4.10 Table 4.2 summarises the quality issues identified at individual facilities and also the specific access arrangements at each site.

Table 4.2 – Site Specific Quality Issues

Site	Court Type	Number of Courts	Floodlit Courts	Quality Comments	Court Quality Rating	Availability
St Aidans Academy	School – Not available	4	0	Standard school tennis courts overmarked for other sports.	Standard	No public access advertised to tennis courts, although lettings are available for other facilities.
Wyvern Academy	School – Not available	3	0	Basic tennis courts offering no community use. Overmarked.	Standard	No public access to courts.
Longfield Academy	School – available	5	5	Good quality school courts, appear tidy and well maintained.	Standard	Facilities available for community use. Tennis noted on website, although leans towards group bookings and no prices provided
Darlington Education Village	School - available	3	3	Standard school tennis courts overmarked for other sports.	Standard	Tennis court available for hire. Prices provided on lettings website
Redworth Hall Hotel and Leisure Club	Commercial	2	0	Poor site overall. One court is unusable due to mossed surface and leaf debris. Some dips on court surface. No footpath to reach courts.	Poor	Access for members only
Stanhope Park	Parks	2 (1 without equipment)	0	Spray line marks slightly messy, basic courts. One court without equipment at time of site visit. Some dips in surface and fencing needed attention.	Poor	Public facility. Free of charge
Wellfield Tennis Club	Club	3	0	Good courts in excellent condition, courts appear to be recently repainted. New nets potentially	Good	Club. Pay and play available for non members

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Site	Court Type	Number of Courts	Floodlit Courts	Quality Comments	Court Quality Rating	Availability
				required. Tidy site, but restricted parking (at pub only). Lack of floodlighting restricts club activity – floodlighting is a key priority.		through online system
New Blackwell Tennis Club	Club	6	4	Well kept tidy site with good courts. Lighting requires replacement on court 4, there is also an intention to replace lighting to court 5. Lack of covered courts restricts capacity and means there is no tennis in the case of inclement weather. Storage limited. Nice pavilion but small.	Good	Club. No pay and play
The Denes	Parks	3 (1 no equipment)	0	Spray line marks slightly messy, basic courts. One court without equipment at time of site visit. Some dips in surface and fencing needed attention.	Poor	Public facility. Free of charge
Hummerskno tt Academy	School - available	4	0	Good quality school tennis courts overmarked for netball.	Standard	Public access available. Tennis not explicitly offered – tennis court area is marketed for netball
Hurworth School	School – available	2	0	Standard school courts overmarked for netball	Standard	Courts available for hire
Polam Hall School	School - available	5	0	Planning application approved for replacement provision – new high quality courts to be provided and community use will be secured.	Standard	Courts available for hire. Documented on website as available
South Park	Parks	2 (1 of which had equipment)	0	Tennis courts in park on MUGA. Some dips and water retention	Standard to poor	Public facility. Free of charge
Rockcliffe Hall Hotel	Commerci al	1	1	Tennis courts in grounds of hotel. Floodlit. Recent planning application approved to convert second tennis court into padel court (August 2025)	Standard to good	Access for members only

4.11 Overall therefore, there is scope to improve the quality of tennis courts across the Borough, particularly the public facilities situated within parks. This reflects the position at the time of the PPS in 2021, where the quality of public tennis courts was poor as a result of limited investment.

Gathering Demand Data

LTA Tennis for Britain (2024– 2028)

4.12 The strategy highlights recent successful delivery between 2019 and 2023, specifically noting that;

- Adult participation is the now the highest ever recorded
- Over 700000 children are also playing weekly, which is again a record
- The biggest investment programme in parks tennis in partnership with UK government has just been completed.

4.13 Efforts have focused around three key areas of tennis development, specifically;

- Participation - Making tennis a sport for anyone to play, through increasing participation and access;
- Performance - Becoming one of the most respected nations in the world for player development;
- Transformation - Transforming tennis in Britain by working with everyone in the sport.

4.14 Moving forward, the vision of the LTA remains to "Open Tennis Up" by making it more welcoming, enjoyable and inspiring to everyone. Several key focuses are identified, many of which relate to or impact on the facilities that are required. These include;

- diversity and grow the player base, with a focus on lower socio economic groups, disability and women and girls programmes
- Attract, grow and diversify the padel and tennis workforce
- Implement the facilities strategy with a focus on parks, covered courts, community indoor tennis centres and padel
- Engage with and promote different formats of the sport
- Implement and support comprehensive parks tennis operating models.

4.15 The delivery of appropriate facilities is therefore a key vehicle for achieving the overall aims and objectives of the LTA.

LTA Padel Strategy (2024 – 2029)

4.16 The LTA has been recognised as the governing body for padel since 2020. The padel strategy sets out how growth in participation will be achieved through the same mechanisms as for tennis – by making padel accessible, welcoming, enjoyable and inspiring. The key priorities of this strategy are to;

- Increase awareness from 20% to 40% of the population and interest in playing from 7.5% to 15%
- Increase the number of annal padel players from 129,000 to 400,000
- Increase the number of padel courts from 350 to 1000
- Grow the padel coach and activator workforce
- Enable 10 players to break into the top 200 to inspire the padel audience.

LTA Insight into Participation in Tennis and Padel

4.17 The LTA has sought to gain a better understanding of where people play tennis and understand some of the barriers that restrict participation levels. This insight can be used to inform decision making in relation to facility requirements.

4.18 As documented in the LTA strategy above, nationally, since the 2021 SFS there have been positive trends in engagement with tennis. Annual participation has now reached 5.6 million players per year and 2.6 adults play regularly each month. Almost 4m children played tennis in

the last year with 1,398,837 playing monthly and 619,000 playing weekly. This participation is spread across the park, club and education sector and participation growth is now being seen across all demographics. Participation in padel is also growing exponentially, with more than double the number of participants nationally in 2025 than there was in 2024.

4.19 The LTA have provided the following insight into participation in the different facility types;

Parks Sector

- A significant proportion of tennis participation in the UK takes place in a park environment.
- The park environment is the most common place where new participants will start their tennis journey. For those that don't play, the majority of people who have expressed an interest in playing would see the park environment as their first option for play.
- Participation in parks is often less frequent and generally aligns with the seasonal participation peaks in the summer months. This trend is not helped by the lack of floodlit provision that currently exists in the park environment.
- Park players are generally more interested in recreational play and are less reliant on organised activity.
- Park players are most dissatisfied with the condition of the courts, the number of courts available and the journey from booking a court to the actual play. The LTA, in partnership with the government have recently upgraded over 2500 park courts to enable greater levels of participation within park environments.
- The LTA has also successfully implemented technology that improves the customer journey to court. This involves the use of an access gate with keypad entry which is connected to the Clubspark venue management system. Where implemented, the system has been successful in increasing participation rates. This system can also be used to generate an income which helps with the financial sustainability of the site if appropriate.
- The LTA is looking to significantly increase the number of gate access systems that are installed nationally as part of the Digital Participation Pathway.
- Padel is still early in development in parks, however the LTA is keen to see this development and see it as a natural offer alongside multi-sport and tennis provision.

Club Environment

- The club environment is a very important sector for participation, particularly the regularity of play which generally increases in the club market.
- The club market has a greater focus on organised activity both via coaching, social mix in sessions and competition.
- There has been an increase in the number of clubs that are looking to implement online booking systems and the gate access technology. This not only offers the ability to increase the amount of court usage at a venue but acts as a key marketing tool locally in the quest to attract more users to a venue.
- Club environments provide a clear opportunity for the further development of padel, working alongside existing tennis provision.

Schools

- The delivery of tennis within schools is a priority for the LTA with a range of resources available to support the curriculum and wider school outcomes.
- In addition, the LTA is committed to working with schools to widen community access to the sport both during and out of school hours. There are several examples where school tennis facilities both indoor and outdoor are a very important element of the tennis facility landscape within communities.

Existing Participation in Darlington

4.20 Insight therefore demonstrates the varying roles that different facility types play in meeting demand. Provision of facilities in a variety of settings is consequently necessary if all potential tennis players are to be served.

4.21 In Darlington, as it was in 2021, demand is evident across club, school and public facilities, and padel courts are now also provided as part of private commercial ventures. Participation at each of the venue types is reviewed in the sections that follow.

Public Sites

4.22 There are only three public tennis sites in Darlington, all of which are located in parks in the central / south western areas of the town.

4.23 All public tennis sites are accessible free of charge, and are accessed on a first come first served basis. All were open and available for use at the time of site visits, but as in 2021, there is no formal monitoring of usage. Anecdotally, there is scope to significantly increase the amount of activity that takes place on these sites. No tennis was taking place at the time of site visits (summer season).

4.24 LTA insight demonstrates that the quality of tennis courts is important in attracting and retaining players. Site visits however identified that the quality of parks courts in Darlington is poor, which is likely impacting on the levels of use. Club feedback suggests that there is a perception that the poor quality of public courts is restricting the number of people playing tennis at a grassroots level in Darlington, whilst the policy of removing nets at public sites during the winter months is also deemed to impact on participation, by limiting the ability to play grassroots tennis all year round.

4.25 The LTA believe that the provision of higher quality public courts, alongside the implementation of digital access systems is a key priority in Darlington. As a consequence, The LTA have recently sought to engage with Darlington BC as part of their Parks Investment programme. This has not yet been taken up by the Council.

Pay and Play Access at School sites

4.26 Tennis courts at school sites are equitably distributed across Darlington (See figure 4.1 later in this section) and are typically of standard quality. Reflecting the strong community use programmes offered by schools, the availability of tennis courts at school facilities is good however Table 4.3 demonstrated that there is very limited advertising of the facilities and that the availability of courts, as well as the booking procedures that should be followed are not clear at many of the sites. As a consequence, it is likely that awareness of their availability is limited.

4.27 At all schools that were visited it was suggested that there is scope to increase the level of activity on the courts, and very little community activity was reported to take place at any site. Indeed almost all schools indicated that there had been no bookings of their courts. This suggests that there is opportunity for school sites to play a much greater role in the delivery of tennis than they currently do and is the same position as was evident when the PPS was last prepared in 2021. The LTA confirm the importance of securing access to tennis courts on school sites and highlight the potential penetration rate that these courts offer.

4.28 LTA insight suggests that as with public parks, the improvement of the customer journey at school sites is essential if use is to be improved. LTA funding related to the installation of technology on the site to deliver this is available for schools.

Club Membership

4.29 As outlined earlier in this section, club members generally participate more regularly and on a less seasonal basis than those that use park facilities. Participation can also be more accurately quantified at club bases.

4.30 Both tennis clubs in Darlington report a recent small recent decline in participation. We note however that whilst the membership reported by New Blackwell Tennis Club has reduced since the 2021 strategy (from 324 to 292), participation at Wellfield has increased (from 116 to 140), confirming that the decline is recent.

4.31 Clubs report that the barriers to existing participation, and to further participation growth are;

- The amount of public courts limiting the number of grassroots tennis players. Poor quality of the existing public courts is perceived to exacerbate this further
- The increasing popularity of other sports making recruitment of tennis players more challenging;
- Lack of floodlighting (at Wellfield) which means that tennis can only be played for restricted hours during the winter months
- Lack of covered courts which reduces capacity for tennis in winter and inclement weather.

4.32 In addition, both clubs highlighted a need for ongoing qualitative improvements at their sites (ageing courts etc) to ensure that facilities offered remain attractive and functional.

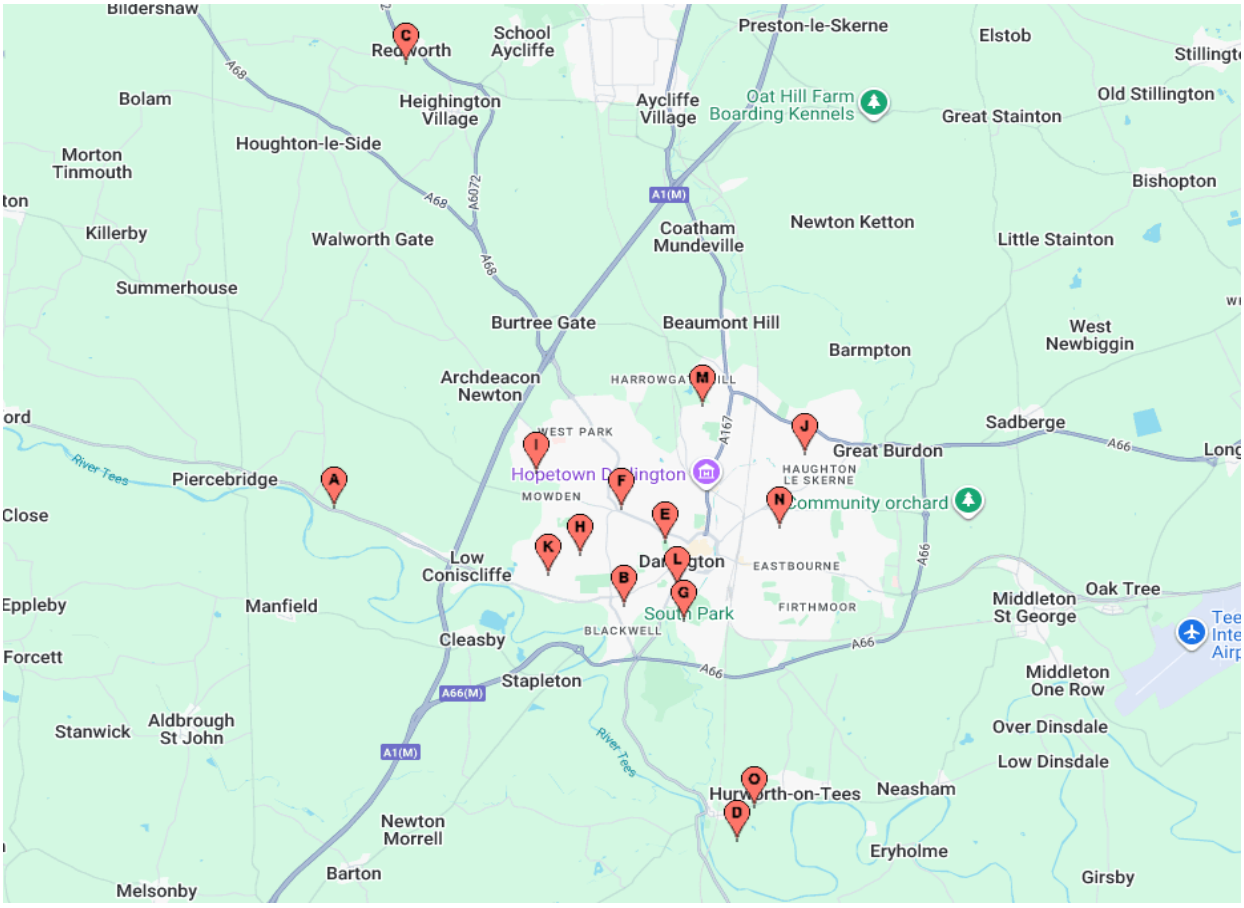
Adequacy of provision

4.33 Analysis therefore demonstrates that there is variety in the type of tennis court offered, but that participation is primarily club based, with limited use of the public or education sites. This is impacted by both the quality and marketing of facilities. While club provision is good, recruitment of members is impacted by the poor offering at a grassroots level and a view that there is a need for further promotion of opportunities at club bases if membership is to grow. It is also highlighted that historically, clubs have supported the promotion of tennis in schools through the provision of coaching, but funding is no longer available to do so.

Access and Availability

4.34 Figure 4.1 shows that courts are spread across Darlington, although the number of sites containing facilities for tennis is significantly higher in the west of the borough than in the east. There is no provision in the settlements of Middleton St George and Heighington.

Figure 4.1 – Distribution of Courts in Darlington



Key

ID	Site Name	ID	Site Name
A	Wellfield Tennis Club	I	Wyvern Academy
B	New Blackwell Tennis Club	J	Darlington Education Village
C	Redworth Hall Hotel and Leisure Club	K	Hummersknott Academy
D	Rockcliffe Hall Hotel	L	Polam Hall School
E	Stanhope Park	M	Longfield Academy
F	The Denes	N	St Aidans Academy
G	South Park	O	Hurworth School
H	Carmel Roman Catholic Technology College (currently used as a car park)		

4.35 Notably, Figure 4.1 confirms that all public facilities are concentrated in the south and western parts of Darlington, with one of the two clubs also in the same area (and the other outside of the main settlement boundaries). Access to pay and play is therefore particularly limited in the eastern and northern parts of Darlington.

4.36 To ensure local access to pay and play tennis courts for all residents, this means that courts at education sites may be critical in facilitating grassroots participation in the eastern and northern areas of the Borough. The 2021 strategy reported that Longfield Academy and The Education Village may offer particular potential (as they are both floodlit and located in areas of lower

provision) and this remains the case. St Aidans Academy is also well located to serve residents in the eastern parts of the town.

Quantity

4.37 There are no formal demand models providing guidance on how many courts are required in a local area to inform decision making. The LTA has however defined a series of parameters that can be used to determine the number of tennis players that can be accommodated by the existing infrastructure. The most up to date parameters set by the LTA are as follows;

Court Type	Member per court (adult and junior)	Player on programme per court (adult and junior)	Member Club Pay and Play Bookings per Year	Pay and Play Venues bookings per year
Outdoor unlit court	40	20	600	1400
Floodlit Court	60	30	600	1400
Indoor Court	150	75	600	2400

4.38 The above would suggest that;

- Club based courts offer capacity for 440 members
- Public parks courts offer capacity for 9800 bookings per annum. If booked by the same user 30 times per year, this would enable 326 individuals to make these bookings.
- There is capacity of circa 1800 bookings on commercial courts. Given that these in Darlington, the courts at commercial sites are operated on a membership basis, the use of the member per court ration can be accurately applied – commercial courts therefore offer capacity for 120 players
- There is further capacity at school sites (albeit less than the capacity of public courts, as they are unavailable during the school day). Assuming that each court is able to accommodate 600 bookings per year (in line with member club pay and play) With 8 floodlit courts and 11 non floodlit courts, these could accommodate an indicative 11,400 bookings total. On the same basis (30 bookings per year) this would equate to another 380 users across the courts.
- There are no indoor courts and consequently no indoor capacity currently offered.

4.39 The above calculations would suggest that total capacity of the existing infrastructure is therefore circa 1266.

4.40 Whether this capacity is adequate is difficult to accurately define due to the lack of monitoring of the use of public courts and the fact that there are no detailed records about the usage of tennis courts on school sites. It is not thought however that anywhere close to the potential number of separate bookings takes place on these courts. It therefore appears that there is significant capacity on these facility types, based on the current levels of participation.

4.41 Club membership can however be accurately measured using LTA parameters. This is set out in Table 4.4. It reveals that New Blackwell TC have very limited spare capacity and Wellfield Tennis Club already have more members than their courts can sustain based on the parameters. This is reflected in the discussions with clubs, who indicate that although the quality of facilities is good, additional capacity is required at both sites.

Table 4.4 - Capacity of Club Bases

Club	Membership	Courts	Capacity of Courts (Members)	Capacity for Growth	Other Issues
Wellfield LTC	140	3 non floodlit	120	0	• Require new nets • Floodlighting required to improve capacity • Club also identify need for access to covered courts
New Blackwell LTC	292	4 floodlit and 2 non floodlit	320	28	• Club has shortage of coaches /volunteers. Also struggling with membership • Improvements required to one set of floodlights, club also seeking additional floodlights • Access to covered courts required

4.42 The LTA parameters also consider the additional uses that take place at a club base.

4.43 At New Blackwell LTC, there is no use permitted of the site by non members. Whilst the club run extensive coaching programmes, the website confirms that all players accessing these courses aged year 4 and above must be members of the club. The adult rusties session is open to non members, but has limited places. This therefore suggests that the use of the ratio of courts to members is representative of demand at New Blackwell.

4.44 At Wellfield TC however;

- Pay and play is open to non members – the club estimate that they receive a couple of bookings per week
- Pickleball is also played on the site (through Richmond and Wellfield Pickleball Club)
- Coaching sessions are also accessible to non members (although the club website confirms that players are required to become members once they've attended three sessions).

4.45 The majority of coaching is therefore still likely to focus on members, but pickleball usage and pay and play are additional to the membership. The information provided by the club suggests that at this point in time, this additional usage is minimal. Importantly however, it takes place on top of the club membership, which is already above the capacity of the courts.

4.46 It is clear therefore that there is very limited capacity remaining at either club base.

Overall Adequacy of Provision and Future Demand

LTA Insight into Potential Demand

4.47 It is clear therefore that within Darlington, it is likely that there is significant scope to increase participation.

4.48 The LTA have researched the number of people playing tennis and the composition of the tennis playing population. This provides both an understanding of who is currently playing, but also the potential tennis playing population within an area. This work suggests that there is

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significant scope to grow participation in tennis and nationally, participation is already starting to increase.

4.49 To provide further insight into the type of facilities that are required (and to inform the type of marketing and promotion that may be successful) The LTA have created 6 different profiles to show what different people want from their tennis experience. These 6 profiles are;

- Tennis Titan - Frequent players & tennis club members for whom tennis is their main sport and key interest
- Tennis Troupers - Often club members, largely family-oriented, middle-aged players for whom tennis is a hobby; interested in playing with teams to partnering with their kids in the sunnier seasons
- Seasonal Spinners - Largely young women, they play sport in general for athletic reasons (often being gym-goers and joggers), and enjoy their tennis a lot, though tennis is very intertwined with friends and being social
- Wimbledon Warriors - Largely young men who are keen athletes, they like tennis and want to play more, though are often held back by other factors outside of the summer
- Social Butterflies - Infrequent, younger and less experienced players for whom tennis is an occasional fun summer activity
- Senior Stalwarts - An older group of players for whom tennis is a social habit and they play with a regular group as a way of keeping social and enjoyable gentle exercise.

4.50 Analysis of the existing LTA membership in Darlington demonstrates that 83% of current players fall into the senior stalwarts category. The remaining members are Tennis Titans (7%), seasonal spinners (6%) and tennis troupers (5%). Over 60% of all LTA affiliated members use courts within a 10 minute drivetime of their home, suggesting that access to local facilities is important.

4.51 With senior stalwarts enjoying regular tennis for social reasons as well as exercise, their interest spans across both club courts and park courts. Critically for this group, play often takes place during the daytime as many are retired. This means that access to facilities at these times is essential, which can often rule out the use of school sites. This emphasises the importance of providing appropriate parks facilities, as well as access to the club sites.

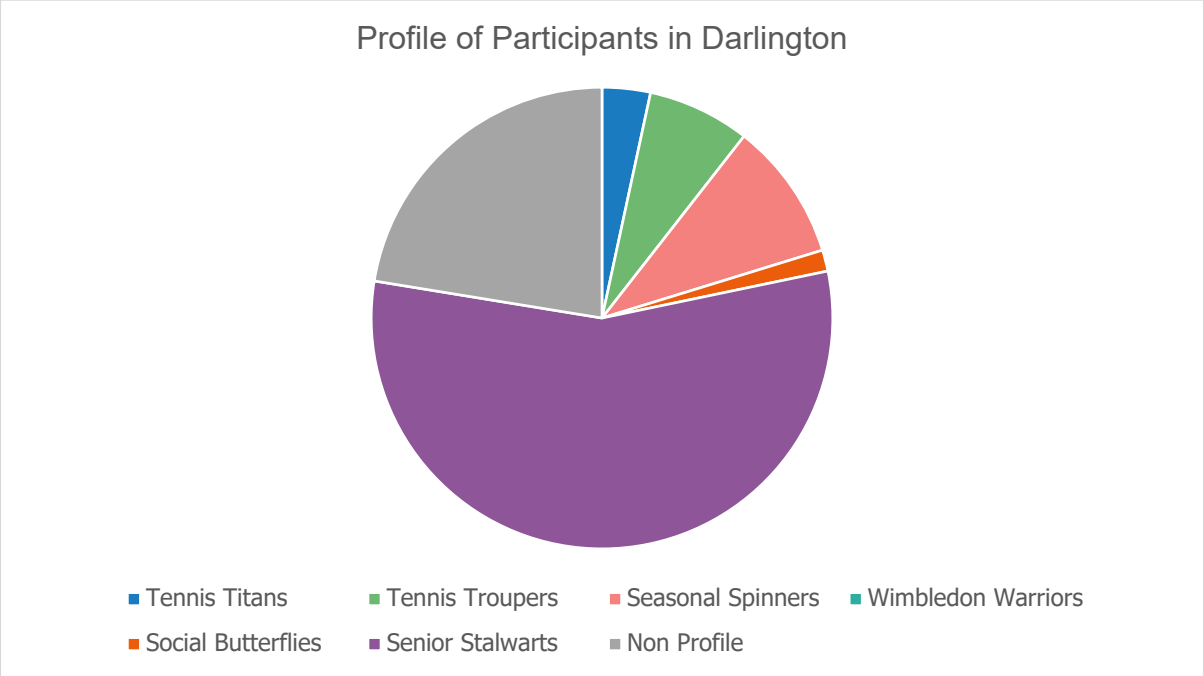
4.52 Through analysis of the population profile of the borough, the above profiles can used to analyse the potential penetration for tennis and the types of facilities best meet the needs of the potential participants.

4.53 Analysis of the population profile of Darlington suggests that senior stalwarts are currently over represented (predicted proportion of participation 56% compared to 83%) ie it would be expected that a lower proportion of total participants would fall into the senior stalwarts category. In other words, a higher proportion of residents in other groups would be playing tennis than are currently doing so.

4.54 This suggests that there is significant potential to attract new players that are not currently playing (although senior stalwarts are still likely to make up more than half of all participants). In particular, underrepresentation of players falling into the seasonal spinners and tennis troupers categories, as well as those typically described as non profile suggests that these groups could be targeted to engage with tennis. As non profile residents do not fall directly into one of the most likely participant groups this group will be harder to attract in the first instance. Parks courts are likely to be particularly important in encouraging play by these current non participants in the first instance.

4.55 Figure 4.2 (provided by the LTA) summarises the profile of potential tennis players in Darlington.

Figure 4.2 – Profile of Potential Tennis Participants in Darlington



4.56 Further in depth analysis by the LTA suggests that geographically, the majority of demand, as may be expected given the location of the population is in Darlington town.

Overall Adequacy of Provision

4.57 We know that currently, there is more than adequate capacity outside of the club infrastructure for tennis, with public and school facilities receiving limited use. Low levels of participation are potentially a direct reflection of the poor quality of the facilities, as well as the limited promotion that takes place on both public and school sites. With these two facility types typically accommodating grass roots tennis, and demand from new participants when they first try the game, addressing these issues will be essential if participation targets are to be achieved.

4.58 LTA estimates of potential demand are based upon the number of people that fall within the groups most likely to play tennis. In Darlington, the number of people categorised as seasonal spinners / Wimbledon warriors and Social butterflies totals 11,799. LTA estimates suggest that 8% of this potential demand could be converted – this would generate a potential of 944 players in total.

4.59 Based on the calculations set out earlier in this section, the total capacity of tennis courts in Darlington equates to circa 1246 players. This suggests that this total potential demand could be accommodated and therefore infers that the total number of courts that are available would be adequate, even if the potential demand for tennis was turned into actual players.

4.60 Importantly, if new participants transitioned from grass roots sites (parks and schools) through to club bases, the modelling suggests that there is unlikely to be enough capacity available on club sites to accommodate these new players. This reflects the views raised by clubs.

4.61 The role that schools play (and potentially the creation of satellite clubs, as well as improved capacity for existing clubs) will therefore become increasingly important. This position is also reflective of the position in 2021.

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4.62 Whilst much of the growth in tennis is likely to be derived from engagement with existing under represented groups, it is likely that population growth will also generate an increase in demand for tennis.

4.63 In partnership with Sport England on the Active Places Power platform, The LTA have developed a calculator that can be used to predict the impact of population growth. For Darlington, application of this calculator to the assumed population growth (13,106) suggests that an additional 260 visits to tennis courts will be generated per week. This equates to 1.67 tennis courts.

4.64 The calculations above demonstrate that the existing infrastructure is sufficient to meet current demand, and equally, that there would be scope to accommodate the additional 167 players, even if maximum potential participation levels were achieved amongst the current population.

4.65 This suggests that the provision of additional tennis courts is not directly necessary to meet future demand. That said, it has been reported that tennis courts in Darlington are predominantly located in the south and west of the borough, with provision much more limited in the east and north. Given that much of the potential housing growth is likely to take place in the north of the borough, it will be necessary to take accessibility into account when determining whether any new tennis courts should be provided.

Indoor Provision

4.66 One of the key messages arising from analysis above therefore is that additional capacity is required to sustain club activity. Alongside floodlighting at their home bases, clubs consider that access to covered / indoor provision is essential if their activity is to be sustained and growth is to be achieved. A lack of covered courts within Darlington was highlighted as one of the key issues for clubs. Reflecting this, improving access to covered tennis is also a priority for the LTA, particularly as covered courts are required to facilitate year round participation.

4.67 The LTA have established key metrics to determine where community indoor tennis is required. They note that a target location must demonstrate a minimum threshold population of 70,000 within a 20 minute drive time of a target location. Of this population, at least 12,500 must identify as having an interest in playing tennis. This drive time extends to 30 minutes for rural areas.

4.68 Areas are then filtered to take into account competition within the catchment in order to prioritise where new indoor provision is required. This methodology has enabled the identification of 72 target locations for new indoor tennis venues in England, which includes Darlington. Identification of Darlington as a priority reflects the analysis in this section, which identifies gaps in the infrastructure for clubs (particularly in terms of supporting growth) and a high priority placed on access to courts all year round.

4.69 It is understood that a planning application for the creation of a multi-sport venue on the new Faverdale Industrial estate has recently been approved – this is understood to include commercial indoor tennis provision and / or padel courts and may address some of this requirement.

4.70 Polam Hall School are also understood from consultation with the LTA to have expressed an interest in providing indoor / covered tennis provision. It is not thought that this is part of the existing proposals for refurbishment of the school site however, although this will see new replacement tennis courts. Feedback from the LTA as part of this planning application expressed an interest in securing covered courts (for example a canopy structure) at this site.

4.71 No other schools have expressed a specific interest in accommodating covered and / or indoor tennis courts at their site during the data gathering phase of this assessment. The analysis does however identify that schools will need to play a clear role in providing for tennis moving forwards if capacity is to be sufficient for the achievement of participation goals.

4.72 With capacity of covered or indoor courts increasing to 200 members per court (from 40 for a non floodlit court), as well as addressing the concerns raised by clubs about lack of year round tennis opportunities, the provision of indoor tennis facilities would provide a way of sustainably increasing the capacity of clubs, and would future proof the total capacity for tennis in Darlington.

Padel

4.73 The recent introduction of padel has been followed by a rapid increase in the number of padel courts both nationally, and locally in Darlington. Table 5.1 demonstrated that there are now 12 padel courts located at three venues across Darlington (Pure Padel, New Blackwell Padel and Rockcliffe Hall Hotel).

4.74 As with tennis court provision, to assist LAs in strategically planning padel provision across the authority, the LTA has established a method of determining the number of courts required. This is based on population density and padel demand and the resulting figures form a starting point for conversation and strategic planning.

4.75 The application of the current methodology for Darlington would shows that;

- The total current population of the Borough is 111,695
- LTA parameters suggest that demand for padel is 20% of this population – 22,339
- Parameters suggest that 8% of this demand can be converted – 1782
- On the basis that one padel court can accommodate 200 players, this would suggest that 9 padel courts are needed to sustain demand in Darlington.

4.76 With 12 existing padel courts, this would suggest that there are now enough padel courts in Darlington to meet the needs of the current population and no clear requirement for additional facilities. The provision of further courts on Faverdale Industrial Estate would add to the existing infrastructure.

4.77 The rapid growth of padel means that at this stage, these parameters provide an indication only as to the likely level of demand for padel. If significant increases are experienced and sites reach capacity, further provision may be required over the life of this strategy document.

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Summary

4.78 The key issues arising for tennis across Darlington are therefore summarised below.

Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• Provision remains broadly consistent with 2021 – there are 45 tennis courts across the Borough, 38 of which are available for community use • Since 2021, 12 new padel courts have also been installed at Blackwell Meadows, Pure Padel and Rockcliffe Park Hotel • There are 12 floodlit courts located at New Blackwell Tennis Club (4), Longfield Academy (5) and Darlington Education Village (3) and Rockcliffe Park (1) • Quality of tennis facilities is varying, with public facilities of poor quality and school facilities standard. Club facilities are good, with courts at Wellfield Tennis Club having been resurfaced since the 2021 PPS	• Quality of public courts require improvement if drive to increase participation is to be led by these sites • Some improvements required at club bases - floodlighting
Demand	• Nationally, there have been positive increases in participation since the 2021 strategy • LTA insight highlights the importance of parks courts in providing a rounded offer for tennis, indicating that it is in parks where most people start their tennis journey. • Access to public facilities across Darlington Borough is currently free of charge and access is unmanaged and actual levels of participation are therefore unknown, although anecdotally, courts are believed to be underused. Clubs believe that the limited public facilities negatively impacts on the number of tennis players in the Borough • Levels of community bookings on school sites are also limited, although this could be influenced by poor marketing and promotion as well as unclear booking procedures • The same two tennis clubs remain, but both have seen a slight recent decline in membership. Since the 2021 strategy, membership numbers have declined at New Blackwell, but there has been a slight increase at Wellfield.	• Increasing participation nationally, but some key barriers identified in Darlington including; ○ Court quality ○ Marketing and promotion
Adequacy of Provision	• Based upon current levels of participation, there are enough courts to accommodate potential demand. Estimated demand equates to 944, whilst there is capacity for 1266 players. • It is evident therefore that the current stock of parks and school courts are underused. Low levels of participation are potentially a direct reflection of the poor quality of the facilities, as well as the limited promotion that takes place on both public and school sites. With these two facility types typically accommodating grass roots tennis, and demand from new participants when they first try the game, addressing these issues will be	• Darlington Education Village / Longfield Academy offer particular potential to increase usage as their courts are floodlit, which increases the playing season • LTA are able to support schools with gate access technology and

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	essential if participation targets are to be achieved. Despite the pressures on the existing clubs, both suggest that promotion of opportunities for tennis across Darlington, alongside investment into the quality of parks courts, should be the key priority moving forward • Although overall there is enough capacity, this disguises the pressures at club bases - Wellfield TC has no remaining capacity and very limited remaining capacity is available at New Blackwell. Consultation with the clubs highlights that this represents the actual situation, with both identifying a need for additional capacity (ideally floodlit and covered) • Importantly, if new participants transitioned from grass roots sites (parks and schools) through to club bases, the modelling suggests that there is unlikely to be enough capacity available on club sites to accommodate these new players. • The role that schools play (and potentially the creation of satellite clubs, as well as improved capacity for existing clubs) will therefore become increasingly important • It is also noted that whilst there is enough capacity, tennis courts are primarily located I the west of the Borough, with access in the east and north much more limited. • Clubs identify that the additional capacity is required to sustain club activity. Alongside floodlighting at their home bases, access to covered / indoor provision is deemed to be essential if participation in tennis is to grow. Improving access to covered tennis is also a priority for the LTA, particularly as covered courts are required to facilitate year round participation. New indoor provision in Darlington is identified as a key priority • With 12 existing padel courts, analysis against LTA parameters suggests that there are now enough padel courts in Darlington to meet the needs of the current population and no clear requirement for additional facilities. The provision of further courts on Faverdale Industrial Estate would add to the existing infrastructure. • Application of the SE calculator to the assumed population growth (13,106) suggests that an additional 260 visits to tennis courts will be generated per week. This equates to 1.67 tennis courts. The existing infrastructure is able to accommodate the additional 167 players, even if maximum potential participation levels were achieved amongst the current population. The location of the existing provision (west and south) of the borough may however need to be considered in the event of significant housing growth in the north.	online booking systems to support community use • Both existing clubs are at capacity. Scope to improve floodlighting (New Blackwell) or add floodlighting (Wellfield) to ensure members can be better accommodated • New indoor / covered tennis provision identified as a key priority to enhance club access
Key Issues for Strategy to address	• There is a need to protect the existing stock of courts • There is scope to increase the amount of usage of public facilities, with no proactive marketing or promotion and no monitoring of use. LTA insight also suggests that usage of public facilities increases when more structured access is provided (improving the	

	customer journey through online resources, controlled access etc). This would require both qualitative improvements to the courts and the introduction of technological solutions to ensure that long term, residents have access to quality, sustainable provision • Club bases are at capacity and there is little room for growth without compromising the player experience. There is a potential requirement for floodlighting works at both club sites • There is opportunity to tailor new programmes for tennis at school sites to increase usage of courts. The Education Village and Longfield Academy represent a particular opportunity as they have floodlit courts. Improvements may be required to school sites to improve desirability. • The capacity position at club bases means that further provision is a priority – Darlington is identified as a key location for covered / indoor tennis courts • There is scope to accommodate the projected future demand within the existing infrastructure, although the key issues identified with regards the current stock of courts will need to be addressed. Equally, the potential gaps in access to the north and east of the borough mean that tennis provision may need to be considered in the event of significant housing growth

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5.0 Bowls

Introduction

5.1 This section evaluates the key issues for bowling in Darlington. It sets out the supply and demand for facilities and determines the adequacy of provision both at the current time and in future years.

Gathering Supply Data

5.2 There are seven sites each containing a single outdoor bowling green in Darlington. There was also previously a second green at South Park which is disused. This position is consistent with the position that was set out in the 2021 PPS.

5.3 Table 5.1 summarises the greens that are available. It demonstrates that all of the greens are now managed by the Bowls Clubs themselves (or the Darlington Park Bowls Association, an organisation run by the clubs).

Table 5.1 – Bowling Greens across Darlington

Site Name	Number of Active Greens	Management of Green
North Lodge Park	1	Darlington Parks Bowling Association
Darlington Railway Athletic	1	Darlington RA Bowls Club
Middleton St George Bowls Club	1	Middleton St George Bowls Club
North Park	1	Darlington Parks Bowling Association
South Park	1 (plus 1 derelict green)	South Park Bowls Club
Woodlands Bowls Club	1	Woodlands Bowls Club
Eastbourne Sports Complex	1	Hundens Green Community Bowls Association

5.4 In addition to the above greens, there is also an indoor bowls facility at the Morrisons Centre, which provides 8 rinks and offers year round access to bowling.

Green Quality

5.5 The quality of bowling greens was explored through a variety of means, including;

- Non-technical site visits
- Consultation with representatives of each green
- Discussions with regional representatives of the bowling community.

5.6 At the time of visits, all greens were ready for use. While many sites would benefit from improvement, no greens were reported to be in poor condition, and it was clear that significant effort had been made with green preparation. Site visits reported that;

- All greens are functional and all offer basic facilities (pavilion etc)
- All greens were suffering from bare patches and some were also suffering from weeds, moss and thatching. To some extent, this was reflective of the dry conditions that had been experienced. It also however reflects a lack of professional winter maintenance

- At some sites, other issues were identified, including poor maintenance of paths and a requirement to upgrade buildings.

5.7 Crucially, it appeared from the quality issues evident at the time of site visits that as identified in the 2021 SFS, a focus on winter maintenance should be the greatest priority. Professional and regular maintenance outside of the season would increase the performance of the green during the season.

5.8 Consultation was undertaken with representatives of each green in order to understand the key issues impacting bowling, and a meeting was also held with representatives of Bowls Durham and Darlington Bowls Association in order to gain a strategic understanding of priorities across the borough.

5.9 Reflecting the site visits, which identified areas for improvement, the quality of the facilities was identified as one of the main barriers to the growth of bowls. Several issues were raised relating including;

- Playing surfaces are of limited quality and are perceived to be deteriorating - at many sites, the bowling surfaces are substandard for the quality of some players that use them
- Maintenance is the main challenge for all clubs – where there is sufficient income to employ a professional company, this is typically for basic tasks only. Outside of this, clubs are reliant on volunteers;
- Recruiting able volunteers is challenging, and is particularly difficult when the number of club members is declining. Several clubs are now reliant on one or two ageing volunteers who dedicate numerous hours each week to maintaining the facilities. Most of these volunteers are not experienced grounds people and consequently greens are receiving little specialist maintenance input
- The ancillary facilities available are limited at most sites and many are in poor condition. Several bowling greens have limited toilet provision (with some offering no toilets close by for ladies). This is off putting for current and potential members and restricts interest in participating.

5.10 Chart 5.1 illustrates the views that were gathered through consultation with site representatives. Users were asked to rate the quality of greens, with 1 being poor, greens of average quality awarded a score of 2 and a good quality achieving a rating of 3. It demonstrates that car parking was the lowest scoring factor, with clubs emphasising the importance of parking close to the green in order to support those with access issues.

5.11 Paths, changing facilities and playing surface were the other low scoring areas, and therefore key priorities for improvement.

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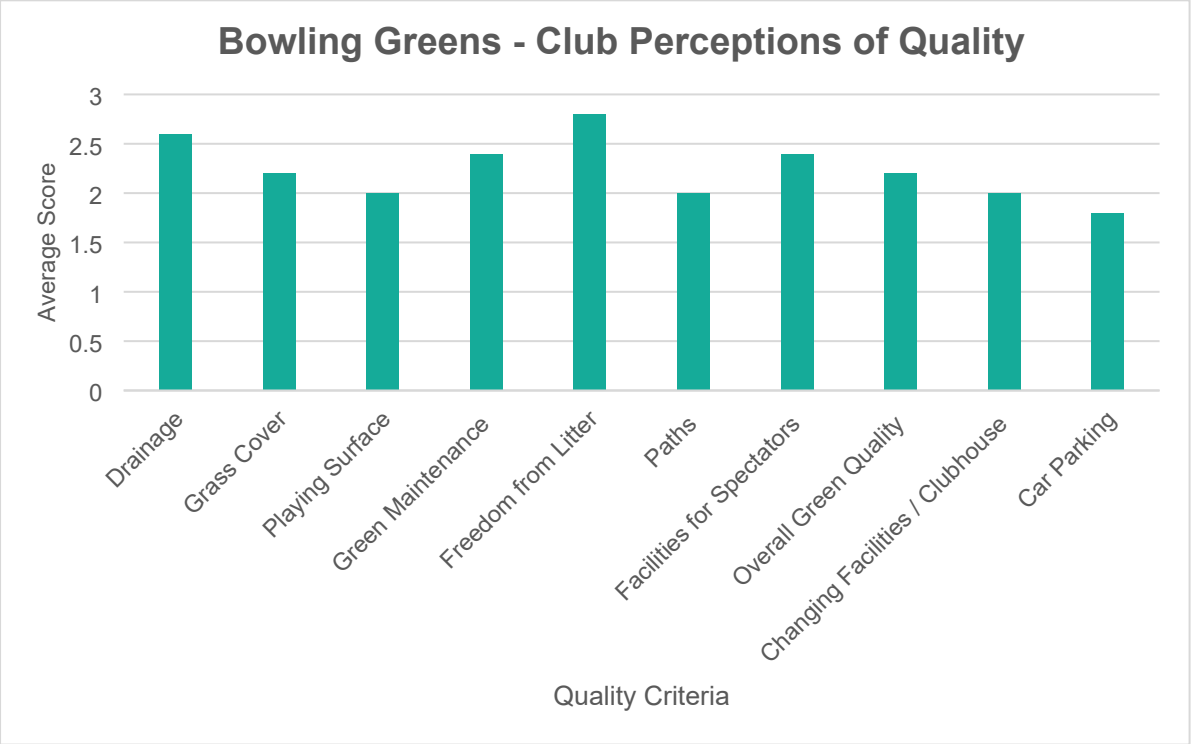
Chart 5.1 – Club Perception of Quality Issues



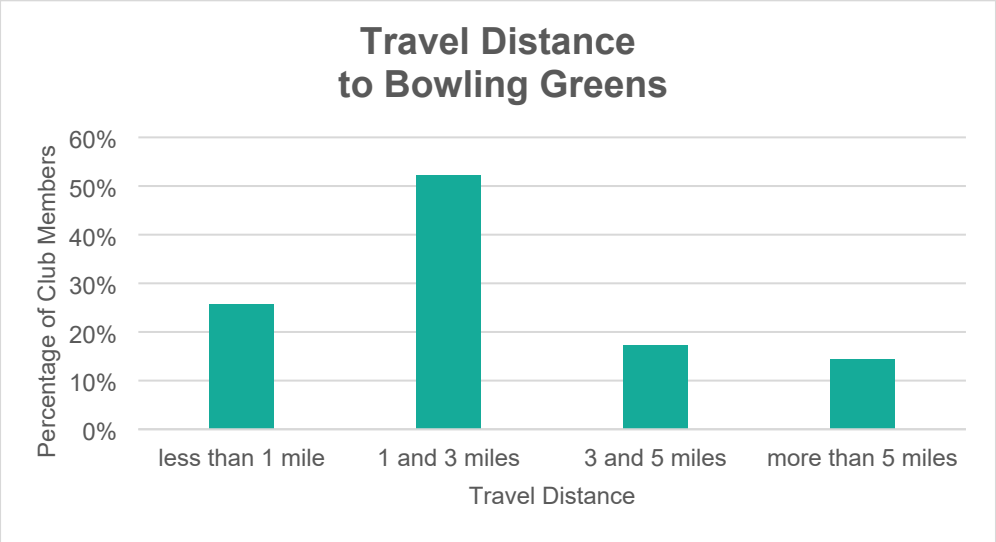
5.12 Reflecting the findings of clubs and site visits, consultation with Darlington Bowls Association and Durham Bowls confirm that issues with the playing surface are the key concern. If facilities are not appropriate for bowls, then people will not use them.

5.13 Table 5.2 later in this section summarises the specific issues identified on each site.

Accessibility

5.14 The majority of bowling greens have a relatively local catchment and this is illustrated in Chart 5.2. It demonstrates that just under 75% of current members are thought to travel less than 3 miles, with circa 22% travelling less than 1 mile. This means that members predominantly choose to play at greens local to their home - provision of greens close to the home is therefore important if participation is be retained.

Chart 5.2 – Travel Distance to Bowling Greens



5.15 Consultation suggests that those bowlers that do travel further are typically those playing at a more competitive level. They travel to reach higher quality greens and to play on teams alongside more accomplished players.

5.16 The existing greens are distributed predominantly to the north of the town centre, with the exception of South Park, which is to the south. The green in Middleton St George provides importance provision for people in this village. The distribution of greens therefore means that there are some areas of the Borough lacking in local facilities.

Demand

5.17 Nationally, the Sport England Active People survey indicated that participation in outdoor bowls declined over the 2005 - 2016 period. In 2005 0.83% of the adult population played outdoor bowls at least once a week. By 2016 this dropped to 0.51%.

5.18 The Active Lives Survey records activity from 2017 up to the present day. It reveals that between 0.6% of the population now participate in bowls or boules, based on figures released in 2024 (for the November 2023– November 2024 period). This is illustrated in Chart 6.3. Analysis of trends shows that in both England and the North East, participation has increased marginally since the end of the covid pandemic but has remained relatively static for the last few years. Participation in the North East is slightly below levels across England as a whole.

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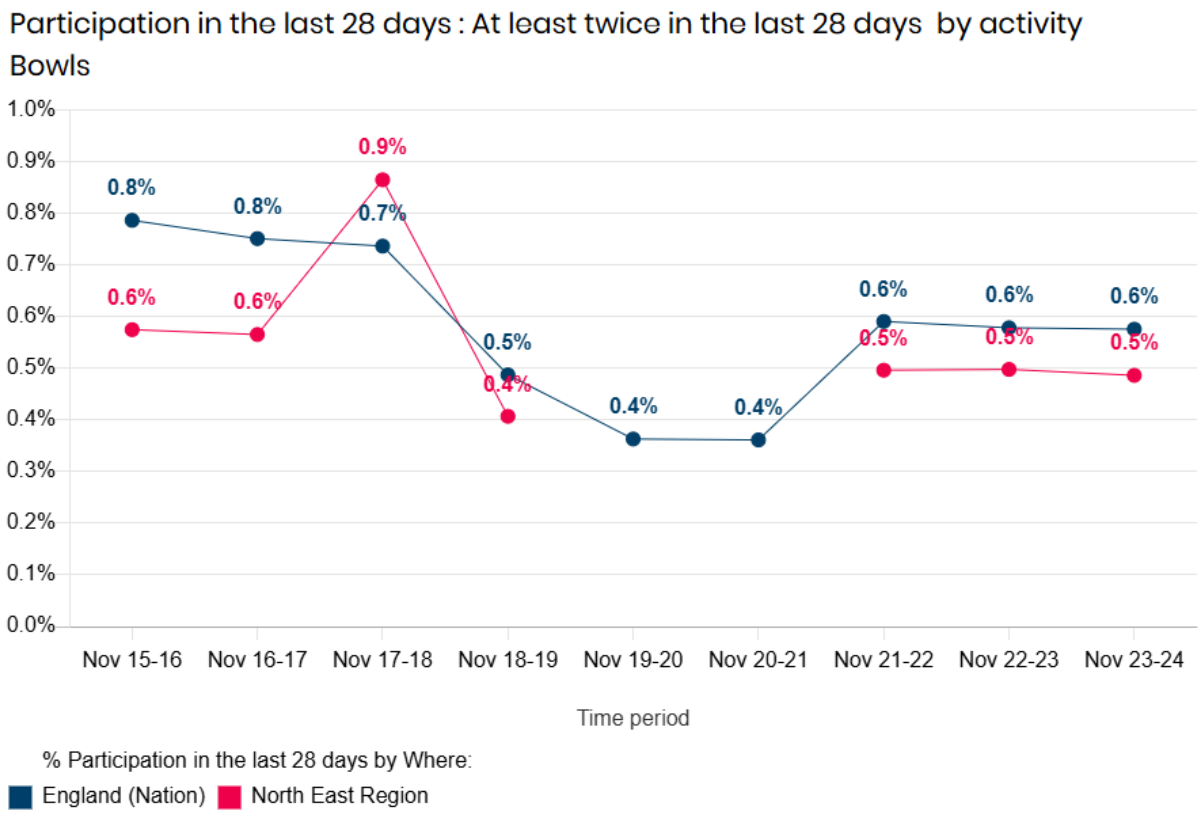
Chart 5.3 – Participation in Bowls (provided by Sport England Active Lives Survey)



Actual Participation

5.19 Discussions with Bowls Durham confirm that the Active Lives survey is reflective of the national picture today. Participation in bowls remains relatively static (with a very small decline in membership to Bowls England in 2024 compared to the previous years) although there are now some areas, particularly in the south of England, where bowling is thriving. Participation in the north east is struggling.

5.20 In Darlington all greens currently have a club on site. Sixteen teams were entered into the main league structure in 2025, which is only just below capacity (20) and has been fairly consistent in recent years. It is clear that those engaged with bowls are playing regularly. There are competitions four out of five working days.

5.21 Evidencing the ongoing challenges with participation in bowls however, the main change for bowls in 2025 in Darlington was the withdrawal of North Park from the majority of competitions due to significant decline in membership. As a consequence, the future of this club is now uncertain.

5.22 Figure 5.4 however confirms that non all clubs are experiencing declining membership, and participation trends vary significantly. At more than 50% of clubs,, overall membership is static or declining but both Middleton St George and North Lodge Park are experiencing an increase in membership. At Middleton St George, this has been achieved following a period of active recruitment supported by an incentive of free membership for the season, whilst at North Lodge Park this has also been attributed to recruitment.

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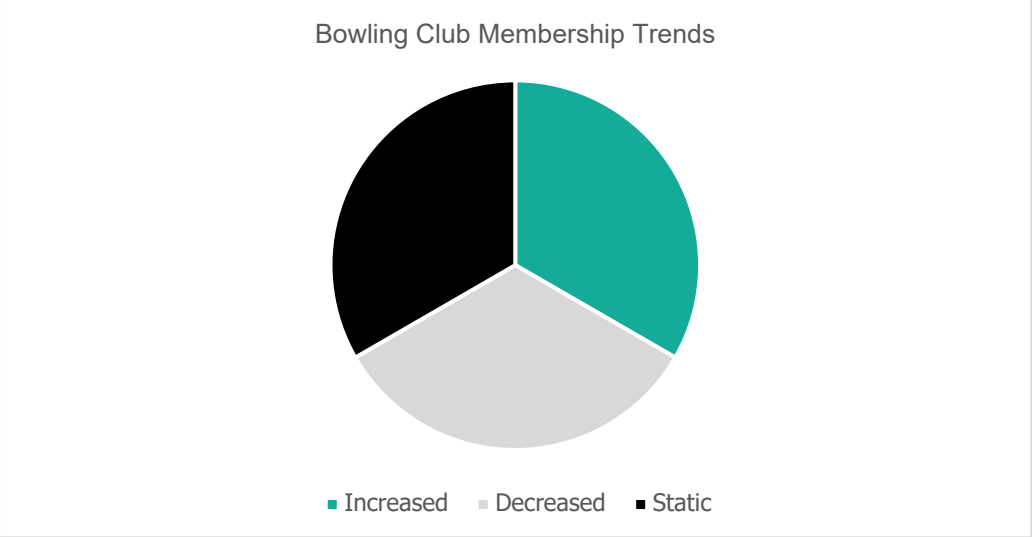
Figure 5.4 – Club membership trends



5.23 Despite some increases in participation, membership was identified as a big challenge for bowls clubs in Darlington. The key challenges were reported to be;

- All clubs are actively seeking new players, but almost all are finding it hard to recruit. Some clubs have recently invested significantly in advertising / recruitment to little effect. Other clubs suggest that they are looking to understand how to promote their green effectively online
- Signage is felt to be poor and visibility of some greens is also limited -this impacts on the awareness of opportunities and makes recruiting more challenging
- At some sites, the limited quality of clubhouses / ancillary provision are thought to impact on recruitment of new members.

5.24 Whilst Bowls Durham, supported by the Bowls Development Alliance are working to grow bowls and offer support through new initiatives that can be embraced by clubs, this is reliant on volunteers to support these activities at each clubs. The lack of availability of volunteers and coaches to drive participation growth is one of the biggest barriers for bowls however locally as well as nationally. In some areas however, Bowls' Big Weekend, Bowls Bash and PlayBowls, amongst other initiatives are starting to generate new players and so there is potential for success if these opportunities can be taken.

5.25 As a consequence of the above challenges, the sustainability of bowls remains an ongoing challenge. As membership declines, so does income, which results in a lack of investment. Facilities then become poorer, meaning that recruitment of new members is even more difficult. This circle of decline is evident in Darlington, as it was at the time of the 2021 SFS.

National Governing Body Perspective

5.26 Bowls England is the main NGB for Flat Green Lawn Bowls in England. The organisation's strategy (Fit for the Future – August 2021) identifies five key priorities;

- Improve the brand - Ensure bowls is relevant, visible, reach target audiences
- Make bowls accessible – introductory forms of the game, modernise digital platforms, break down barriers, diversity and inclusion strategy, building new partnerships
- Positive playing experiences – support mixed memberships and pay and play, broadening involvement, performance pathways and providing annual structured programme of competition

- Support volunteers – support club management teams, arrest the decline in facilities, support volunteering programme, ensuring appropriate quality and quantity of officials.

5.27 Whilst there is limited direct reference to facilities within the strategy document (although clearly facilities are an important component of retaining and increasing participation), it is evident that many of the above priorities directly relate to the key issues identified in Darlington.

Adequacy of Provision

5.28 The key components determining the adequacy of provision are discussed in the section that follows. There are no formal demand models for bowls and so instead a combination of quality, quantity and accessibility must be considered.

5.29 The adequacy of bowling greens is evaluated by drawing together the data collated and determining the key issues impacting current and projected future participation.

Green Quality

5.30 Whilst assessments demonstrate that most greens are functional, there are qualitative improvements required at many sites, and maintenance, particularly winter maintenance is highlighted as perhaps the key priority for local clubs. It is essential that effective maintenance programmes are implemented at each club to avoid deterioration of facilities and the knock on impact that this might have to participation. This was endorsed by Bowls Durham and Darlington Bowls representatives. Table 5.2 highlights the key site specific issues that need to be addressed.

5.31 Nationally, it is important to note that there is support and advice available relating to green improvement and maintenance. Again however it is reliant on volunteers to access these resources.

Table 5.2 – Adequacy of Provision at Each Site

Site Name	Membership	Quality Summary	Other Issues
North Lodge Park	20	Green benefitted from reinstatement funding in 2017. Green is of standard quality, but shows signs of wear and tear, thatching, moss and bare patches. Paths in good condition, but some debris in gutters. Seating and pavilion in park, storage containers, 1 toilet available. Requires accessible toilet.	Small number of members and reliance on volunteers means that maintenance, can be a challenge. Club require support with maintenance costs and other utilities bills.
Darlington Railway Athletic	36	Green bare in places, some thatching. Has improved in part as was particularly poor in previous season. Site part of larger social club which offers a variety of facilities, although pavilion is outdated and requires refurbishment. Club indicate that quality of green is inadequate given the high level that many of their members compete at. Poor watering system makes maintenance more challenging. No toilet facilities conveniently located or accessible to the bowlers in close proximity to the green..	Club believe that ability to attract members is restricted by the poor quality of the clubhouse / lack of toilet facilities. Currently reliant on volunteers for maintenance, would benefit from fine turf specialist work to improve quality of green.
Middleton St George Bowls Club	40	Green requires reinstatement works during winter months – showing moss, some weeds and gaps. Bare patch in corner which is to be addressed. Toilets / buildings would benefit from updating. Club received funding to upgrade one building in May	Focus on improvements to green. Reliant on specialist advice from manufacturers on green maintenance. green. Need to upgrade

Site Name	Membership	Quality Summary	Other Issues
		2025 but further investment required into toilet facilities.	toilets is also identified. Membership recently increased.
North Park	10	A reasonable green, but showing wear and tear, thatching moss and bare patches.	No dedicated parking – street parking with charge. Falling membership has now reached levels where club is at risk. Well hidden location makes member recruitment challenging.
South Park	Estimated 100	Green open access within park setting. Evidence of heavy usage with some bare patches, some moss and thatching also evident. Green is open access and consequently suffers damage to the surface on occasion – bikes etc. Pavilion is a public café facility achieved with Sport England funding opened 2025. Toilets available but also used by general public.	
Woodlands Bowls Club	75 (plus equivalent non playing members)	Tidy green with well painted pavilion, club volunteers supported by professional company. Green will require reinstatement works to address evident wear, as well as thatching and bare patches over winter.	Large social membership supports playing membership. Club satisfied with facilities available. Club experience challenges recruiting due to the cheaper fees offered by other (publicly owned) clubs. Maintenance is expensive and costly to cover even with a high membership.
Eastbourne Sports Complex	45	Green in standard condition, although some bare patches. Pathways frequently overgrown due to boundary hedges not being cut regularly. Clubhouse is adequate although club report it would still benefit from improvement. Site is concealed from view, not clearly signed as supporting bowling and not inviting due to the scale of gates.	Declining membership, struggling to recruit members. Club indicate that lack of signage does not support their recruitment activities – the club is hidden away and therefore greater proactive promotion is required. Club have struggled on occasion this year to put teams out.

Amount of Greens

5.32 There are no formal parameters for measuring the adequacy of bowling greens although Bowls England provides some measures that can be used to evaluate the capacity of existing greens any understand any challenges in relation to the quantity of facilities.

5.33 As a guide, 80-100 members is considered a very healthy membership for a bowling club, while an average club will have 50 - 60 members. Table 5.2 included the current membership of each site and confirmed that membership of clubs in Darlington varies significantly, with high numbers at Woodlands Bowls Club and South Park, and very low numbers at North Park. Membership at North Lodge Park, Darlington Railway Athletic and Middleton St George also falls below the national average although the number of participants at these sites is sustainable.

5.34 The average membership per site in Darlington is 55 members, which is just above levels identified in the 2021 PPS. This average membership suggests that overall membership is in line with the national position. With capacity for at least 100 members at each site however there is clearly room for additional participation within the existing infrastructure.

5.35 At any one time, a good quality green can accommodate circa 48 players and the number of club members that can therefore be sustained is significantly higher. While there are some sources that suggest that clubs accommodating a higher number of players than this become overplayed, to maximise sustainability, clubs should instead be encouraged to promote a spread of play across different time slots in order to maximise the number of people that are involved in the club.

5.36 All clubs indicate that they have capacity to accommodate additional players and almost all are actively recruiting. It is clear however that while there is some remaining capacity, the addition of significantly more members at South Park and Woodlands Bowls Club would start to impinge on the experience of existing players, with the greens unable to accommodate all of the sessions and fixtures that may be required (although it should be noted that both of these greens are understood to have a higher proportion of social members, who perhaps participate less frequently).

5.37 At the other end of the scale, improvements to membership levels at greens with fewer existing participants will be vital for sustainability. Bowls England suggest that the retention of an existing bowling green is difficult to support where membership is below 16 - 20 people. This means that sustainability at North Park is now questionable and there are other greens where membership is at or only just above these numbers. The clubs are aware of this, and have made recent efforts to increase their participation, although with limited success to date.

5.38 From a quantitative perspective therefore, on the whole, the existing facilities are sustainable and do have capacity for additional members. The future of the green at North Park will however need to be reviewed urgently, with support given to increase membership if this facility is to continue to operate. It may be necessary to consider a merge with other clubs if efforts to increase participation continue to fail.

Accessibility

5.39 Alongside quality issues (which remains the biggest priority), the importance of access to greens should be noted. The existing distribution of greens is relatively even, although biased towards the north and there is good access for most residents in the majority of locations. Although some residents have further to travel, no concerns relating to access to greens were raised as part of this assessment.

5.40 It is clear therefore that overall, the quality of bowling greens, followed by the condition of pavilions is the key issue for bowls and the key area for improvement based on existing demand.

Winter Bowling

5.41 With outdoor bowls taking place only during the summer months, it is important to reference the existence of Darlington Indoor Bowls Club at the Morrison Centre and the role that it plays in maintaining year round activity in bowls. This facility offers 8 rinks and is used by the majority of outdoor bowls clubs on a regular basis during the winter months. This ensures continuity of bowling outside of the summer season and as a consequence, is a vital facility to support bowling in the Borough.

5.42 It is understood that the indoor facility is full to capacity throughout the winter in particular and remains a vital resource even in the summer, when some players remain indoors rather than moving to the outdoor greens.

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Future Requirements for Bowls

5.43 Proportionally, the largest growth in the population is expected in the 60 years and over population. The profile of current participants in bowls means that the ageing population is likely to influence participation more so than for most other sports.

5.44 By 2036, there will be 37600 residents over the age of 60 in Darlington. This is likely to stimulate additional demand for bowling and place additional pressures on the existing infrastructure.

5.45 Table 5.3 summarises the potential impact of the population growth. It uses the existing club membership as a base

Table 5.3 - Calculation of potential growth in bowls

Current Situation (2026)	
Area considered	**Current Participation (Known Club Membership)**
Current Population Aged 60+	31349
Participation in Bowls	326
% Of Current Population Participating in Bowls	1.03%
Future Situation (2036)	
Future Population aged 18+	37600
Assumed Future Participation in Bowls (participation remains constant)	1.03%
Potential Future Participants in Bowls	387
Change (2022 - 2039)	+61

3.0 Table 5.3 therefore indicates that based upon existing club membership, assuming participation rates remain constant, demand for bowls is likely to increase by 61 members as a direct result of population growth.

3.1 Based on the average membership of clubs, this level of membership is still sustainable within the existing stock and indeed, continues to offer spare capacity. This suggests therefore that there is sufficient stock of facilities to meet current and future demand and there is scope for growth within the facility stock.

3.2 For the majority of greens, the additional members will provide welcome increased income and will improve sustainability of bowls across the Borough.

Participation Growth

5.46 Whilst there is little evidence currently that participation is increasing significantly, the Bowls Development Alliance has been created by bowling's national governing bodies to channel Sport England investment into bowls. The core purpose of the organisation is to;

'Sustain, grow and develop the sport in partnership with the bowls family.'

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5.47 Club development managers have been established in each part of the country and they seek to work with clubs to support and facilitate participation growth. The support offered includes help with recruitment and facility improvement.

5.48 The 2024 / 2025 annual report suggests that hundreds of clubs were engaged through direct development support, notably;

- 1071 people completed online training with support from BDA
- Over 1000 individuals took part in week of learning sessions
- Over 140 new participants were welcomed through bowls for health programmes

5.49 As the impact of the Bowls Development Alliance continues, there is potential that participation in Darlington may also start to increase. It is clear however that there is adequate capacity within the existing infrastructure to sustain this increase, even taking into account the likely impact of population growth.

Summary and Key Issues

5.50 The key issues for bowls that need to be considered as part of the strategy development are summarised overleaf.

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Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• There are 7 sites containing functional bowling greens which is consistent with 2021 • All greens are functional but there are quality issues at all venues. In particular, there is a need to improve the maintenance procedures at all sites, with a particular focus on out of season reinstatement works • Availability of volunteers to support maintenance works remains a key challenge • Level of ancillary facilities is also varying – at some sites facilities are particularly lacking and there is an aspiration for upgrades	• Maintenance improvements at all sites • Improvements to off green infrastructure - pavilions
Demand	• Participation in Darlington is declining, with league entries only slightly reduced. Nationally the number of bowlers is increasing but continues to struggle in the North East • All greens have an active bowls club, but falling membership is identified as a key concern. • All clubs have capacity for new members and are actively recruiting • Sustainability remains key priority	• Falling membership attributed to poor signage / lack of awareness / marketing, as well as issues securing volunteer commitment. Clubs also believe that poor ancillary facilities negatively impacts on recruitment potential.
Adequacy of Provision	• No evidence of demand for additional facilities, all responding clubs have scope to accommodate existing members • Club membership is varying, but many clubs are below national average levels. Both North Park and North Lodge Park have memberships low enough that sustainability is questionable. Increases in number of players at these sites are crucial to improve sustainability of existing facility network • The views of the bowling community suggest that improved quality is of significantly greater priority than the provision of additional greens • Population growth is likely to generate demand for 61 additional bowlers – this can be accommodated within the existing infrastructure	• No additional greens required to meet demand, but all existing infrastructure, with possible exception of North Park, important to retain
Key Issues for Strategy to address	• All existing active greens (except North Park) are required to meet current and projected future demand. There is no requirement for new greens • Qualitative improvements are necessary if facilities are to continue to meet local needs – maintenance is key focus but works to ancillary facilities are also needed • Clubs require support to improve participation and recruit new members.	

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6.0 Hockey

Introduction

6.1 This section evaluates the adequacy of pitches for hockey and provides;

- An overview of the supply of AGPs that are suitable for hockey
- An outline of demand for hockey
- An understanding of activity at each site
- A picture of the adequacy of current and future provision across the Borough.

Gathering Information relating to Supply

6.2 England Hockey Guidance is that the following types of AGP are suitable for hockey;

- Water Based (suitable for high level hockey and football training if the pitch is irrigated)
- Sand Dressed (acceptable surface for hockey and suitable for football training)
- Sand Filled (preferred surface for hockey and suitable for football training)
- Gen 2 – multi sports surface approved for hockey, tennis and netball.

6.3 3G pitches are not acceptable surfaces for competitive hockey.

6.4 In Darlington, as was the case at the time of the 2021 SFA, the only pitch that fits with the above definition is the sand dressed AGP at Carmel College, which was built in 2017. This pitch is floodlit and is directly managed by the school.

Quality

6.5 Planning permission for the pitch at Carmel College was received in 2016 and the facility was built in 2017. The pitch is supported by new accessible changing accommodation that is in good condition.

6.6 Whilst the facility is now 8 years old, it has been well managed and maintained and remains a standard to good quality facility. There are no existing serious quality issues or damage to the surface and the quality of line marking remains good. With the average lifespan of such an AGP equivalent to circa 10 years however, it is likely that refurbishment / replacement will need to be considered over the lifespan of this strategy document. There are some early signs of wear, including moss / lichen on the surface and some areas where grip underfoot is worsening. Some concerns relating to unofficial use / litter etc on the pitch were also identified by the club.

6.7 The club do not identify any other issues, although they highlight that the provision of dugouts would be beneficial to support their match play.

Gathering Information relating to demand

6.8 Consistent with 2021, there are currently two hockey clubs playing in Darlington – Darlington Hockey Club and Bishop Auckland Hockey Club. Both clubs are based on the pitch at Carmel College.

6.9 Table 6.1 summarises the teams that the two clubs run, their membership and their usage of the pitch.

Table 6.1 – Hockey Demand in Darlington

Club	Teams	Membership / Affiliation	Pitch Usage (Training)	Pitch Usage (Match Play)
Darlington Hockey Club	3 ladies, 2 male and junior section	Junior Male (5 – 10) 12, (11 – 13) 11, (14-16) 12, Senior Male (17 – 18) 8, (19 – 21) 4, (22 – 25) 2 (26 – 35) 6, (36-45) 5 and (46 +) 6 Junior Female (5 – 10) 8, (11 – 13) 15, (14-16)13, Senior Female (17 – 18) 3 (19 – 21) 2, (22 – 25) 7 (26 – 35) 16, (36-45) 9 and (46 +) 8	Juniors – Monday evening (2 – 2.5 hours) Senior ladies Tuesday evening (1 and 1/4 hour) Mens training Tuesday evening (1 and 1/4 hour))	Saturday – Seniors Sunday morning – Juniors
Bishop Auckland Hockey Club	1 ladies	Not known	1 and ¼ hour training per week	Saturday - Seniors
Total	**6 senior teams, 1 junior section**		**Up to 6.5 hours per week**	**Saturday Senior play, junior play Sunday morning.**

6.10 Table 6.1 therefore confirms that there are currently six senior hockey teams playing in Darlington, alongside a junior section. This level of participation is broadly similar to the position in 2021.

6.11 Bishop Auckland HC continue to run one team, whilst at Darlington Hockey Cub, there has been a reduction of one male senior team but this has been offset by the addition of one senior female team. The club also continue to run their junior section.

6.12 Darlington HC indicate that recently, they have experienced an increase in participation. When evaluating club membership between the 2021 strategy and the current position, it is evident that junior participation has dropped slightly, but senior participation (particularly female) has increased. Crucially, with participation remaining static, it is clear that the new players that were generated between 2017 and 2021 immediately following the development of the new facility at Carmel College have been retained.

Educational Demand

6.13 Educational use of AGPs takes place outside of peak hours and there is therefore no impact on the availability of the facilities for community hockey (as the artificial surface means that AGPs are not impacted upon by levels of use in the same way that grass pitches are).

6.14 School participation can however have a knock on impact on demand for hockey by generating new players that subsequently transition into the club. It is clear however from discussions with secondary schools that there is little participation in hockey. None of the schools travel to use the AGP at Carmel College.

6.15 There is some participation at primary school level, but the drop off at secondary school level means that it is more difficult for the clubs to generate new players, as there is little interest arising from engagement with the sport through school.

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Assessment of Supply and Demand Information and Views

6.16 The assessment of the adequacy of facilities to meet demand for hockey takes in to account both the requirements for competitive play and to meet training demand.

Spare Capacity across the week

6.17 Table 6.1 confirmed that the AGP at Carmel College is used for up to 7 hours per week for hockey. Although the pitch is available for booking outside of these times, there is no other use of the facility and the pitch is currently dedicated to hockey. There is therefore significant spare capacity and potential for additional use.

Peak Time Capacity

6.18 England Hockey guidance is that an AGP is able to sustain up four to five games per day, dependent on factors such as floodlighting, warm up areas and local league structures.

6.19 Table 6.2 confirmed that there are 6 senior teams using the pitch at Carmel College, which equates to three match equivalent sessions (MES) per week. With the pitch deemed able to accommodate 4 matches, there is therefore spare capacity equivalent to 1 MES.

6.20 We note that whilst Bishop Auckland HC have now played at Carmel College for several years (and were based in Darlington when data for the 2021 SFS was collected), the County Durham Playing Pitch Strategy includes an aspiration for the club to relocate back into County Durham. A new facility is proposed in the Bishop Auckland area that is intended to satisfy the needs of Bishop Auckland HC (alongside additional requirements from Durham Dales HC). If this new pitch were to be delivered, spare capacity at peak time would increase (to 1.5 MES) and the amount of midweek spare capacity would also increase.

3.3 It is clear therefore that the existing facility is able to accommodate all demand for hockey within Darlington. Importantly, it is evident that many of the challenges typically faced by hockey clubs (competition with football clubs to access training slots etc) are not experienced in Darlington – the pitch that is available is currently exclusively available for hockey. The club confirm that they are able to access the facility for the hours (and at the times) that they require.

England Hockey Perspective

6.21 The vision of England Hockey's Facility Strategy is;

'For every hockey club in England to have appropriate and sustainable facilities that provide excellent experiences for players.'

6.22 The 3 main objectives of the facilities strategy are;

- **PROTECT**: To safeguard existing hockey provision – there are currently around 1000 pitches that are used by hockey clubs. Key priorities will include influencing playing pitch strategies, working with clubs on facility partnerships and continuing the strong relationship with the FA.
- **IMPROVE**: To improve the existing facilities stock both at grass roots and elite level The current facilities stock is ageing and there needs to be strategic investment into refurbishing the pitches and ancillary facilities. There needs to more support for clubs to obtain better agreements with facilities providers & education around owning an asset.
- **DEVELOP**: To strategically build new hockey facilities where there is an identified need and ability to deliver and maintain. This might include consolidating hockey provision in a local area where appropriate. The research has identified key areas where there is a

lack of suitable hockey provision and a need for an additional pitches. There is also an identified demand for multi pitches in the right places.

6.23 The principles of the strategy seek to provide assessment criteria that can be used to support internal and external decisions about hockey provision. These are;

- The right pitches are required in the right places
- The sport must retain it's geographical reach – particularly in more rural areas
- Appropriate ancillary facilities are required as they are a critical part of the playing experience
- The Local Playing Pitch Strategy needs to identify the hockey provision

6.24 With reference to the England Hockey Facility Strategy, the key objectives for the pitch at Carmel College will be 'protect'. As there is only one pitch in the borough the retention of this pitch is crucial to preserve hockey participation in Darlington.

Future Picture of Provision

Population Change

6.25 Team Generation Rates (TGRs) indicate how many people in a specified age group are required to generate one team. By applying TGRs to population projections, we can project the theoretical number of teams that would be generated from population growth and gain an understanding of future demand.

6.26 Table 6.2 summarises the likely impact of the population growth for hockey. It reveals that because of low levels of hockey participation, there will be limited impact. There will be no additional teams generated in any age group.

Table 6.2 – Impact of Population Growth on Demand for Hockey

Sport and Age Groups	% of population in age group	Number of people from the new population in each age group	TGR	Number of teams generate by new population	Number of home matches	Existing junior hockey member generation rate	Estimated number of junior hockey training squads generated by the new population	Hours Training Demand
Men (17-55yrs)	22.16%	2,904.91	11,936	0.24	0.12			0.37
Women (17-55yrs)	23.28%	3,051.47	8,337	0.37	0.18			0.55
Boys (14-16yrs)	1.75%	229.02	0	0	0	167.33	0.04	0.06
Girls (14-16yrs)	1.68%	219.82	2,057	0.11	0.05	158.23	0.04	0.06
Boys (11-13yrs)	1.46%	190.87	0	0	0	186.36	0.03	0.03
Girls (11-13yrs)	1.41%	185.07	0	0	0	135.47	0.05	0.05

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Participation Growth Aspirations

6.27 England Hockey seek to build participation in hockey, with a particular focus placed upon retention of existing players as well as an increase in the number of players aged 14+. In addition to the traditional form of the game, new forms of hockey have also been introduced, including small-sided hockey and Back to Hockey, as well as Flyerz, a form of hockey suitable for disabled participants. These forms do not require formal facilities and can be played on any facility (including the small sand-based AGPs).

6.28 It is clear that with access to a dedicated sand based AGP for hockey, there is adequate capacity for the existing and projected future hockey activity, but also to accommodate participation growth if required. At least 2 additional adult teams (which would represent 25% growth) could be hosted on the existing facility.

6.29 Darlington HC suggest that their current growth aspirations focus on the creation of an additional male senior team. This could be accommodated within the existing infrastructure. The club do not envisage any barriers to the creation of this team.

6.30 It is evident therefore that the key priority for hockey will be the retention of the existing site, and the timely refurbishment of this facility to ensure ongoing continuity of provision.

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Summary

6.31 The supply and demand and the key issues for hockey in the borough are summarised below.

Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• There is one sand based full sized AGP suitable for hockey at Carmel College • This pitch was opened in 2017 and remains in good condition. Changing facilities have been recently refurbished	• Facility remains in good condition but may reach end of it's lifespan within this strategy period
Demand	• There are two hockey clubs playing and training in the Borough, both at Carmel College. • Darlington Hockey Club are the largest club in the Borough, with a strong adult and junior section • Bishop Auckland HC also play in Darlington, but are considered to be displaced as the Durham Playing Pitch Strategy seeks to relocate them back to their home area • Total demand equates to up to 7 hours activity for training, as well as three MES on a Saturday for match play	•
Adequacy of Provision	• Pitch is exclusively used for hockey, so significant spare capacity is evident midweek • Site is not proactively marketed as available for other sports • Spare capacity at peak time equivalent to 1 MES. If Bishop Auckland HC relocate, this will increase to 1.5 MES • Population growth will have limited impact on demand for hockey, with no additional teams created although participation will increase within each age group • Existing pitch is therefore sufficient to meet both current and projected future demand.	• Potential need / opportunity to increase usage on pitch • Need for early conversations to start to ensure that replacement surface is planned
Key Issues for Strategy to address	• Importance of protecting the existing pitch for hockey • Ageing surface means that facility may reach it's end of lifespan during this strategy period • With 1 pitch required to service demand, there is a need to ensure that plans and funding are in place to maintain continuity of this facility • The continuation of the ongoing positive relationship between Carmel College, Darlington HC and Darlington Borough Council.	

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7.0 Rugby Union

Introduction

7.1 This section evaluates the adequacy of pitches for rugby union. It provides;

- An overview of the supply and demand for pitches
- An understanding of activity at individual sites
- A picture of the adequacy of current provision to meet current and projected future demand.

Gathering Information relating to Supply

7.2 Table 7.1 summarises the rugby union pitches in Darlington. It reveals that there are 12 pitches in total. Two of these pitches are shared with football (one at Darlington RFC and one at Polam Hall School).

7.3 There remain no World Rugby approved 3G pitches in the Borough.

Table 7.1 - Rugby Union Pitches in Darlington

Site	Number of Pitches	Other areas	Number of Floodlit Pitches	Community Use	Facility Type
Carmel College	1		0	Not available for use	
Darlington Mowden Park RFC (Darlington Arena)	3	Large area of land used for mini rugby to the north of pitches	2 (third pitch has floodlights that are not working_	Secured for community use	Owned
Darlington RFC	4 pitches (one of which is unused). One additional pitch shared with football. p		1	Secured for community use	
Hummersknott Academy	1		0	Secured for community use	
Hurworth School	1		0	Secured community use	

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Site	Number of Pitches	Other areas	Number of Floodlit Pitches	Community Use	Facility Type
Wyvern Academy	1		0	Not available for community use	
Polam Hall School	1 (shared with football)			Unsecured (but to be secured as part of recently approved planning application)	

7.4 As in 2021, two of the sites are owned and managed by rugby clubs – Darlington RFC and Darlington Mowden Park RFC. These sites continue to represent more than half of the total rugby stock in the Borough. Both clubs own their sites and consequently there is no issue with security of tenure for either club.

Pitch Quality

7.5 Pitch quality is assessed through the triangulation of non-technical site visits, PitchPower assessments and club and RFU feedback. This is particularly important to ensure that all issues experienced are taken into account.

7.6 The 2021 PPS confirmed that pitches at both club sites were standard to good, but that there were opportunities for further improvement, specifically through the installation of drainage works and the application of more in depth maintenance programmes.

7.7 Club feedback suggests that since 2021, pitch quality has declined. Outside of the first team pitches (which are of higher quality) both clubs continue to identify issues with drainage, alongside other qualitative concerns. Pitch 5 at Darlington RFC has recently been taken out of use due to the extent of the drainage issues that have been experienced.

7.8 The key issues identified at each of the club bases is summarised in Table 7.2, including the PitchPower ratings for each pitch. For consistency with the current methodology, Table 7.2 also summarises the maintenance and drainage ratings achieved at each site, using RFU guidance (2013 PPS Guidance Document) as a basis. These ratings record the level of maintenance that is undertaken (M0/M1/M2) (reported by Clubs / Providers) as well as the adequacy of drainage on each pitch (D0/D1/D2/D3).

7.9 Table 7.2 confirms that the quality issues reported and evidences that the maintenance at both rugby club bases is poor overall (although in both cases, the first team pitch receives a higher maintenance programme than the other pitches). Some of the issues relating to pitch quality could therefore potentially be caused by the limited maintenance that is undertaken.

Table 7.2 – Quality of Rugby Pitches at Club Bases

Site	Pitch Provision	Drainage / Maintenance	Pitch Quality	Changing Facilities	Maintenance Details
Darlington Mowden Park RFC (Darlington Arena)	3 (3 floodlit, although floodlights not working properly on 3rd pitch.)	1st Team Pitch – D2 / M1 Remaining 2 pitches – D0/ M0	**PitchPower Score;** *Main Pitch – Basic* *Pitch 1 – Poor* *Pitch 2 - Basic* First team pitch suffers from a lack of light and therefore grass growth is challenging. Benefits from low levels of use. Pitches 2 and 3 have limited grass coverage and issues with drainage. Drainage last installed 8 years ago, being eroded by rabbits and is now failing (also classified as D0). Pitches improve with sand dressing, but are poorly constructed and volunteers have to fill in holes every week. Flexible space also provided to support mini football.	6 small changing rooms provided in total including 2 ensuite. Remaining changing offers communal showers and toilets. Clubhouse and facilities in adequate condition, but insufficient numbers and size given the number of teams playing.	Pitch 1 aerated 3 x per year, sand dressed once, fertilized twice and weed killed once per annum. Limited maintenance on pitches 2 and 3 – cut and marked regularly, seeded and fertilised once per year.
Darlington RUFC	4 (1 floodlit). One of these pitches is currently not used due to quality. 1 additional stadia pitch shared with football	1st Team Pitch – D3 / M2 Remaining pitches D0/M0	**PitchPower Score;** *Stadia Pitch - Good* *Pitch 1 – Basic* *Pitch 2 – Basic* *Pitch 3 – Basic* *Pitch 4 – Poor* First team stadium pitch (shared with football) is well maintained. Remaining pitches all hold water. No matches played during January in 2026. Significant wear and tear on only floodlit pitch.	10 changing rooms, 8 of which have communal shower and toilets. Ancillary building would benefit from refurbishment. Changing facilities used also by football, although are not accessible to football teams whilst rugby is on.	Not provided

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7.10 It is clear from Table 7.2 therefore that the key priorities in relation to quality are;

- improved maintenance and drainage works at Darlington Mowden Park RFC
- improved maintenance and drainage works at Darlington RFC

Ancillary Provision

7.11 In addition to the pitch issues identified, the ancillary provision currently at the two club sites is also inadequate.

7.12 There is a requirement for additional changing facilities to support the level of activity that takes place at Darlington Modwen Park and a need to improve facilities at both sites.

7.13 The poor ancillary provision is now beginning to impact on rugby development, particularly given the increasing demand generated for women and girls rugby. At both sites, facilities are unable to accommodate the required level of activity and facilities are also poor and not designed to meet modern day standards / requirements (en suite toilets / cubicle showers etc). The need to meet needs of male and female players at the same time places further pressures on the existing provision.

7.14 Improvement works will therefore need to be a key component of this strategy if demand in all age groups and for both genders is not to be restricted.

Gathering Demand Data

7.15 The 2021 identified three rugby clubs – Darlington RC, Darlington Mowden Park Elizabethans (professional club) and Darlington Mowden Park (amateur community club). Together these clubs ran 34 rugby union teams.

7.16 At the beginning of the 2025 / 2026 season, following relegation from National League 1 in 2024, Darlington Park Elizabethans was brought back under the Darlington Mowden Park Banner forming one single club again. This means that both clubs (Darlington Mowden Park RUFC and Darlington RFC) offer the full spectrum of rugby from mini age groups right up to 1st XV, providing opportunities for progression. Both clubs function as community clubs, with Darlington Mowden Park no longer running a professional team.

7.17 Table 7.3 demonstrates that participation has increased since the 2021 SFS, with the two clubs together now providing 39 teams. This increase in number of teams has primarily been driven by growth in the women and girls game. This growth places extra pressures on both the grass pitches but also on the accompanying ancillary facilities, which need to be capable of sustaining activity for a wide range of ages and for players of both gender simultaneously.

7.18 Reflecting the strong junior and mini sections that are evident at both sites, representatives of both clubs are working extensively to ensure ongoing interest in rugby at a young age, with both clubs engaging with primary schools to develop mini rugby and girls rugby. Darlington Modwen Park are also working with Darlington Council to deliver rugby activity as well as to run coaching camps during school holidays.

Table 7.3 – Participation in Rugby Union – Clubs

Club	Adult Male	Vets	Adult Female	Colts	Youth Boys	Youth Girls	Age Grade Boys U12	Age Grade Girls U12	Age Grade (U7-U11)	Trends
Darlington Mowden Park	3	0	1	1	4	3	1	1	5	Increase in senior male, women, girls and mini teams. Static youth participation
Darlington RFC	3	0	1	1	4	4	1	1	5	Increase in female rugby, playing numbers have increased in male rugby.
Total	**6**	**0**	**2**	**2**	**8**	**7**	**2**	**2**	**10**	

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Training Needs

7.19 As is common with rugby union clubs nationwide, training for clubs primarily takes place at the club base on areas that have sports lighting. Where grass pitches are also used for training, this exacerbates the level of activity that they are exposed to. According to PPOSS guidance, two teams training on one pitch for circa an hour and an hour and a half is equivalent to one match equivalent session (MES).

7.20 With no World Rugby approved 3G pitches, as in 2021, all rugby club training in Darlington takes place on grass. At Darlington Mowden Park, all training is spread across Pitches 2 and 3 whilst at Darlington RUFC, training takes place predominantly on the only floodlit pitch (pitch 2).

7.21 Analysis of current club training patterns therefore suggests that midweek training on grass amounts to the following levels of activity;

Darlington Mowden Park RFC – 8.5 MES total

- Adult male rugby union – 2 sessions per week for both senior teams and colts (4 MES)
- Ladies rugby union – 1 training session per week (0.5 MES)
- Youth male rugby union – 1 midweek session for each of the junior teams (2 MES)
- Youth female rugby union – 1 midweek session for each of the junior teams (1.5 MES)
- Mini rugby union – 3 mini rugby teams training across grass pitches once midweek (0.5 MES)

Darlington RFC – 7.5 MES total

- Adult rugby union – 2 sessions per week for senior teams (3 MES), a training per week for colts (0.5 MES)
- Youth rugby union – 1 midweek session for each of the junior teams (3.5 MES)
- Mini rugby union – Only U11 train midweek (0.5 MES)

7.22 It should be noted that where age grade teams either train or play friendlies on a Sunday morning, this has been counted as competitive activity and the impact is not therefore duplicated in the above training figures.

7.23 The above demonstrates that this is a significant level of activity that takes place in addition to the match play.

Educational Demand

7.24 The strong club base is underpinned by comparatively high levels of participation in schools, with all schools with a rugby pitch playing rugby at least during the term time. All secondary schools enter schools rugby competitions each year.

7.25 Tag rugby is also played at several primary schools. In 2023 / 2024, Darlington Mowden Park launched their primary school rugby coaching package which seeks to support schools with introducing rugby and primary school events were held at both Darlington Mowden Park and Darlington RFC during Autumn 2025.

Other Activity

7.26 In addition to usage by Darlington Mowden Park RFC, the Arena site is also used by other groups, with activity equivalent to circa 18 matches per season. These activities are often finals / school competitions run by Darlington Council and Sports Partnership and Tees Valley Sports and primarily take place on the first team (Arena) pitch. The club indicates however that the amount of activity that can be sustained is limited by the poor quality of the club's pitches.

7.27 At Darlington RFC, the first team pitch is shared with Darlington FC, a football team playing in the National League North. The football club have access to the 1st team pitch on Saturday afternoons for home fixtures and also use the facilities on occasion to support midweek matches when fixture scheduling requires. The only use of this pitch for rugby is for match play by the first team.

7.28 Whilst the football club have been using the facilities at Blackwell Meadows for several years, their exact future remains undetermined and they continue to explore options.

Adequacy of Provision

7.29 The capacity of pitch provision for rugby union is measured through the use of match equivalent sessions. The ability of the pitch stock to service both training needs and competitive requirements is taken into account. To fully understand activity on a site, consideration is given to both;

- The capacity of pitch provision at the weekend
- Capacity of a site to meet midweek demand
- The overall position on a site

7.30 Under the current methodology, The RFU sets a standard number of match equivalent sessions that natural grass pitches should be able to sustain without adversely affecting their current quality (pitch carrying capacity). This is based upon the drainage system installed at the site and the maintenance programme used to prepare the pitches.

7.31 The new methodology will however instead use the PitchPower quality assessment tool as a measure of the quality of each pitch. This is then converted into the number of hours of play that each pitch can sustain and the number of Match Equivalent Sessions (MES that this correlates to). This is set out in Table 7.4 below.

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Table 7.4 - Theoretical Pitch Capacity Ratings (RFU)

Capacity of Pitch	Pitch Power Rating		
	Good (or better)	Basic	Poor
Hours	5	4	3
MES	3.3	2.6	2

7.32 Demand is also measured in match equivalent sessions (as set out in paragraph 7.18).

7.33 Where a pitch is located at an education site, unless the true level of education demand is known, it is assumed that each pitch will sustain the equivalent of 1 MES each week curricular activity. This means that there is limited capacity at school sites to sustain further rugby activity (1.6 MES if the pitch is basic quality).

7.34 Table 7.5 uses the above parameters to consider the adequacy of supply to meet the needs of each of the clubs at their home bases. It is important to note that calculations at Blackwell Meadows include the following assumptions;

- In line with RFU criteria, four pitches are deemed to be available at DRFC, even though it is acknowledged that pitch 5 is not currently used due to quality
- Calculations reflect the use of the stadia pitch (alongside football) by the senior 1st team at Blackwell Meadows (this pitch is not included in the calculations in Table 7.5)
- PitchPower ratings used are those set out in Table 7.2 (2 x basic, 1 x poor pitch at Darlington Mowden Park, 3 x basic, 1 x poor pitch at Blackwell Meadows).

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Table 7.5 – Adequacy of Provision at Club Base

Club	Full Size Pitches (Total No. on site including floodlit)	Floodlit Pitches	Total Pitch Capacity (MES)	Weekend / Match Demand (Match Equivalent Sessions MES)	Midweek/Training Demand (Match Equivalent Sessions MES)	Weekend / Match Capacity Position (Match Equivalent Sessions MES)	Midweek Capacity Position (MES)	Overall Site Capacity (Match Equivalent Sessions)
Darlington RFC	4	1	9.8	7.38	9	2.42	-6.4	-6.58
Darlington Mowden Park RFC	3	3	7.2	7.38	8.5	-0.18	-1.3	-8.68

7.35 Table 7.5 reveals that overall, for match play;

- At Darlington Mowden Park, supply is not currently able to meet demand and there is a very small amount of overplay. Capacity at this site is limited by the quality issues experienced and limited maintenance programme. Analysis of the usage of pitches at the site demonstrates to us that it is on pitches 2 and 3 where the capacity pressures exist. Pitch 1 has much lower levels of use.

- At Darlington RFC, there is just enough capacity to meet demand for match play in theory. In practice however, we note that pitch 5 is out of use due to the poor quality of the pitch – usage on the other pitches is therefore currently higher. Again, the limited capacity at this site is a direct result of the low capacity rating which results from the poor quality of the pitch and limited maintenance programme. The main pitch is only used by the first team, alongside the football club – both the supply and demand offered by this pitch are excluded from the above calculations (in line with RFU guidance).

7.36 The above therefore suggests that there is very little remaining spare capacity for rugby match play at either site.

7.37 It is clear however from Table 7.5 that once training activity is also taken into account, specifically

- At Darlington RFC there is insufficient capacity to accommodate midweek training (-6.4 MES) as there is only one set of floodlights, meaning all training activity takes place on one pitch
- At Darlington Mowden Park there is also insufficient capacity to meet training need, despite all pitches being floodlit.

7.38 Crucially, in reality, the grass pitches at both club bases must accommodate both match play and training. Table 7.5 reveals that there is not enough capacity at either site once both requirements are taken into account;

- At Darlington RFC, deficiencies equate to 6.58 MES. Whilst capacity is sufficient for match play, once training is taken into account significant overplay is evident
- At Darlington Mowden Park, demand is already insufficient to meet match play requirements. Training therefore generates additional demand. There is a requirement for 8.68 MES additional capacity to accommodate both training and matches

7.39 The strategy document will need to evaluate how these deficits in capacity can best be addressed through scenario testing. Options will include consideration of both qualitative improvements and also the impact of providing access to WR compliant 3G AGP.

7.40 As set out in Table 3.4, the RFU provides guidance on the capacity of pitches (taking into account their quality, in MES, but also translates this capacity into hours of play. This enables greater clarity to be provided on the demand for training on an AGP (which would be measured in hours). RFU modelling suggests that the likely demand from rugby if 3G AGP were to be used to make up the capacity deficit is;

- 9.5hours for Darlington RFC
- 11.81 hours for Darlington Mowden Park.

7.41 The strategy document will however evaluate the implications of qualitative improvements / new grass pitches etc in order to determine the most appropriate solution to meet rugby demand.

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Other Rugby Union Pitches

7.42 In addition to the issues highlighted at the club bases, a small number of schools accommodate grass rugby pitches. With the exception of the pitch at Wyvern Academy, all of these schools offer community use.

7.43 With no use on site by clubs, and pitches of basic – each offer 1.6 MES spare capacity per week.

7.44 It should be noted that whilst school pitches do represent potential spare capacity, the ethos of rugby union clubs means that while pitches at school sites are important in ensuring that schools are able to continue to play rugby union, their potential role in providing for the club is limited, as clubs would prefer to accommodate all activity at their own base.

Future Picture

Population Change

7.45 Team Generation Rates (TGRs) indicate how many people in a specified age group are required to generate one team. By applying TGRs to population projections, we can project the theoretical number of teams that would be generated from population growth and gain an understanding of future demand.

7.46 Table 7.6 summarises the impact that the projected population growth up to 2036 is forecast to have on demand for rugby union.

7.47 It reveals that in total, there will be an increase of almost 2 MES across the peak period, as well as 2 MES for training. Population growth will see an additional boys and girls youth teams, as well as an age grade team.

Table 7.6 - Impact of Population Growth

Sport age groups	% of population in age group	Number of people from new population in age group-	Existing team generation rate	Number of Teams Generated	Home matches during peak period	Training Demand per Week
Men (19-45yrs)	15.51%	2,033.24	2,672	0.76	0.38	0.38
Women (19-45yrs)	15.76%	2,066.43	8,410	0.25	0.12	0.12
Boys (13-18yrs)	3.62%	474.42	394	1.2	0.6	0.6
Girls (13-18yrs)	3.67%	480.56	576	0.83	0.42	0.42
Mixed (7-12yrs)	6.24%	817.84	640	1.28	0.16	0.32

7.48 The calculator suggests that 1.68 pitches are required to service this demand. With both clubs already at capacity (see Table 7.5), the overplay that is evident will therefore increase.

National Governing Body and Club Aspirations

7.49 The RFU Strategy (2021) focuses upon retaining existing players and attracting new players to the game. In the first instance, the retention of the existing teams is the key priority. Given that both clubs have strong and stable foundations however, it is also hoped that continued growth will be experienced.

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7.50 The Women's Rugby World Cup was hosted in England in 2025, and this has led to a boost in interest in women and girls rugby. This interest has been reflected in Darlington across both clubs and it is anticipated that increases in participation will continue.

7.51 The growth aspirations of the two clubs are;

- Darlington Modwen Park – creation of a vets team, as well as 2 additional age grade teams
- Darlington RFC – additional girls teams, plus growth in junior / age grade groups.

7.52 Both clubs highlight that the key barriers to achieving this growth are;

- The poor quality of the existing pitches
- Lack of access to AGP for training.

7.53 Table 7.6 confirmed that population growth is likely to generate some increases in participation, and it is likely that this will be in addition to the growth that is achieved through sports development initiatives. It is clear from Table 7.5 that this growth in participation cannot be accommodated without action. Table 7.7 briefly summarises the potential future position. It assumes that;

- Population growth will generate 1 MES match play, 1 MES training at each site
- From growth in demand generated by sports development initiatives, up to 1.5 MES match play as well as 1.5 MES training will be generated at each club

Table 7.6 – Potential Future Position

Club	Current Position			Future Position		
	Weekend / Match Capacity Position (Match Equivalent Sessions MES)	Midweek Capacity Position (MES)	Overall Site Capacity (Match Equivalent Sessions)	Weekend / Match Capacity Position (Match Equivalent Sessions MES)	Midweek Capacity Position (MES)	Overall Site Capacity (Match Equivalent Sessions)
Darlington RFC	2.42	-6.4	-6.58	-0.8	-8.9	-11.58
Darlington Mowden Park RFC	-0.18	-1.3	-8.68	-2.68	-3.8	-13.68

7.54 It is clear that the issues experienced are common to both clubs. There is a need to address the capacity issues that are experienced at both sites through improvement to the quality, but also a need to consider how access to AGP could help to address the pressures generated by midweek training requirements specifically. Both clubs have explored the potential to deliver 3G AGPs on their own sites, and this strategy will need to provide clarity on where facilities are required.

Summary

7.55 The supply and demand for rugby union, and the key issues that need to be addressed are summarised below.

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Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• Two club bases containing 7 pitches (plus one unused pitches) as well as 3 pitches at school sites (although the pitch at Wyvern Academy is not accessible to the community) • No 3G AGP that is WR22 compliant for rugby use. • At Darlington RFC the first team pitch is shared with Darlington FC. The long term future of this arrangement remains unclear, but pitch quality is good and able to accommodate the football and rugby activity that is required. Outside of this pitch however, the quality of pitches is poor and there are significant issues with drainage. Maintenance is also limited. The condition of pitch 5 is so poor that the club are not using it this year and have instead identified it as a potential location for an AGP • Pitch quality is also poor at Darlington Modwen Park. There are fewer quality concerns with the main pitch, although this is only of standard quality, but the outer pitches are poor, suffering from drainage issues and poor grass coverage. Again drainage is restricted • Issues also identified with insufficient ancillary provision to meet the needs of the wide range of participants in club rugby – facilities are required to support rugby union for male and female rugby as well as the wide variety of ages that the clubs accommodate	• Poor quality of existing club based pitches outside of the first team pitches • Limited maintenance programmes • Lack of floodlighting at Darlington RFC • Lack of WR compliant 3G AGP to service training needs for both clubs
Demand	• 39 teams identified across the two rugby clubs compared to 34 at time of previous PPS • Almost all growth has taken place in female rugby • High training demand as well as match play, with several teams in both clubs training twice weekly • Population growth will see generation of additional age grade and youth teams, adding to the demand that is already evident	• Increasing demand for girls and female rugby in particular • Increasing participation placing additional pressure on pitches but also ancillary facilities • Clubs report issues with a lack of access to 3G AGP

Adequacy of Provision	• Main pitch at both sites reserved for first team (plus professional football at Darlington FC) / occasional 'show play' and consequently played within level pitches can sustain • All other pitches demonstrate significant overplay • At both sites, the overplay that is evident is exacerbated when taking into account the high training demand • The impact of training is concentrated on just the floodlit pitches, which means that overplay is particularly high on these pitches • Population growth will place further pressures on the existing rugby infrastructure, with demand generated for additional age grade and youth teams in particular. The additional demand may equate to up to 2 pitches.	• Overplay at both sites • Lack of access to appropriate training facilities • Lack of capacity to accommodate growth in demand
Key Issues for Strategy to address	• The need to protect existing rugby grounds • The poor quality of existing grass pitches which restricts site capacity and generates overplay • The limited maintenance procedures, which again limit site capacity • The lack of appropriate facilities to support club training • Challenges with the provision of appropriate ancillary facilities • Insufficient capacity within the existing infrastructure to meet both current and projected future demand.	

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8.0 Football

Introduction

8.1 This section assesses the adequacy of pitches for football across Darlington. It includes;

- A brief overview of the supply and demand for football
- An understanding of activity at individual sites
- A picture of the adequacy of current provision; and
- The future picture of provision for football.

8.2 It considers the provision of both grass football pitches and 3G pitches.

Gathering Supply Information

8.3 There are 71 grass pitches available for secured community use across Darlington and a further 10 grass pitches offering unsecured usage.

8.4 Table 8.1 summarises the breakdown of pitch sizes that are available to the community across the Borough. It should be noted that the pitch sizes are recommended guidelines only. The FA also sets minimum and maximum criteria for each pitch size but guidelines mean that some pitches may meet minimum size criteria for both senior and junior play. We have agreed the category in which each pitch is placed with the Durham FA.

8.5 Pitch totals should also be considered approximate only, as on many sites, layouts change weekly in response to league fixtures / school need etc. It should be noted that pitches and teams within this section are categorised according to pitch size requirements (i.e. teams in U17 and U18 age groups use adult pitches). This differs slightly from the categorisation methods used in FA affiliation data, which considers U17 and U18 teams to be juniors.

8.6 Table 8.1 reveals that 33% of pitches are full sized adult 11v11 pitches and are further 15% are 11v11 youth pitches. Half of all pitches serve the younger age groups, providing opportunities for 5v5, 7v7 and 9v9.

Table 8.1 – Community Use Football Pitches in Darlington

Pitches Type	Total Pitches	Number of Secured Pitches	Number of Unsecured Pitches	% of Community Use Pitches Secured	Changes since previous PPS
Adult Football (aged 16+)	27	23	4	85%	Decreased from 36 available pitches
Junior Football (age U13 - U16)	12	11	1	92%	Slight increase (1 pitch)
9 v 9 (age U11 and U12)	10	10	0	100%	Decreased from 16 pitches
7 v 7 (age U9 and U10)	15	11	4	73%	Decreased from 16 pitches
5 v 5 (age U7 and U8)	17	16	1	94%	Increased from 11 pitches
Totals	81	71	10	88%	

8.7 The total number of pitches available for community use represents a decline on the pitches available at the time of the last SFS (2021). This is because;

- Several pitches at Council sites are not marked out, primarily due to a lack of demand for adult grass pitches at park sites
- Two community centre venues that have historically provided formal pitches now no longer do so – again due to lack of demand. The grass playing fields are now available for informal recreation rather than formal sport
- Many primary schools are also no longer available for community use. It is understood that this is a result of a lack of demand at sites that offer only a small playing field area and typically no ancillary provision
- Whilst community use at secondary school sites remains strong and there are comprehensive community use agreements at the majority of secondary schools, there is currently no access to the playing field at Wyvern Academy, which has historically been an important community site.

8.8 Table 8.1 demonstrated that the level of facilities that are secured for community use is good, with only 10 pitches that are available provided on unsecured sites. All of these pitches are at schools that currently offer community use, but on a more informal basis than those that are formally secured. Both Carmel College and Polam Hall School have been included in this category as there is an apparent reluctance by clubs to use these facilities and at Polam Hall, the pitches is available but not secured. Neither site appears proactively managed to promote community use currently, although it is understood that the recently approved planning application at Polam Hall School (which will have only temporary impact on the football pitch) will secure community use at this site. Unsecured access is also available at Gurney Pease, West Park Academy, Heighington Primary School and Mount Pleasant Primary School.

8.9 Pitches are deemed to offer secured community use when they have;

- A formal community use agreement
- A leasing or management agreement requiring pitches to be available to the community/ a community club
- A formal policy for community use adopted by the owner and or educational establishment
- Written confirmation from the owner and or educational establishment

Which suggest that use is likely to continue for at least three years.

Disused Sites

8.10 In addition to the currently active sites identified, sites that have previously provided formal pitches are still categorised as playing fields even if they are now disused.

8.11 Sites that are classified as disused are not used at all by anyone and are not available for community hire either. Sites that were last used more than five years ago fall outside of Sport England's current statutory remit but still have to be assessed using the criteria in paragraph 104 of the National Planning Policy Framework. On sites disused for more than five years, Sport England would also most likely challenge a proposed loss of disused playing pitches/playing field which fails to meet exception criteria on a non statutory basis.

8.12 There remains only one site that falls into this category in Darlington – at Croft Working Mens Club. This has been used as a motorhome / caravan site since before the 2021 SFS.

8.13 In addition, there are some areas of active sites that are also disused / no longer providing formal grass pitches. There scope to increase the number of pitches provided at Tommy Crooks Park and South Park in particular, with both sites able to accommodate several more pitches than the single pitch that each is currently providing. Pitches at two community centre sites are also

currently functioning informally. As above, for the purposes of planning these sites continue to be classified as playing fields, although the specific pitches are excluded from consideration in this assessment.

8.14 The fact that these former pitches are not currently provided suggests that there remains opportunity to increase the number of pitches available in Darlington within the existing playing field infrastructure if the need is identified, although the challenges of providing grass pitches on publicly accessible parks is recognised.

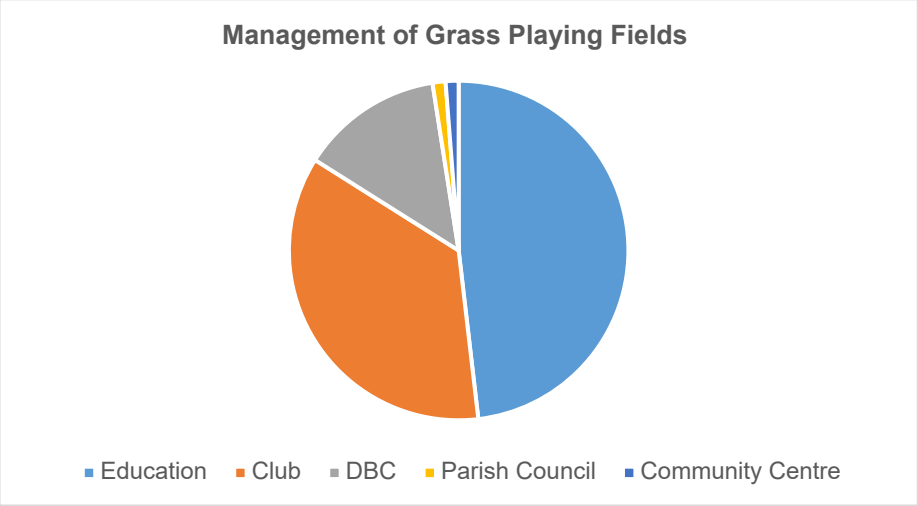
Ownership and Management

8.15 Darlington has historically demonstrated a strong network of community use venues managed by the education sector. Reflecting this, Chart 8.1 illustrates that the Education sector remain the key provider of football pitches for the community. This emphasises the importance of maintaining community use agreements at key school sites, including Longfield Academy, Hummersknott Academy and the Education Village, which accommodate significant quantities of community use.

8.16 Darlington BC remain an important provider of football facilities, in particular managing the central football hub at Eastbourne Sports Complex although reliance on the Council has reduced slightly since the 2021 SFS.

8.17 The FA National Strategy seeks to increase the number of asset owning and managing clubs and it is clear that the number of clubs that are taking responsibility for their own site has increased since the 2021 PPS. Middleton Rangers have recently secured a lease at Teesside Airport Playing Fields, whilst Priory Hurworth House Playing Fields is now managed by Hurworth Juniors.

Chart 8.1 - Management of Pitches



Artificial Grass Pitches (AGPs)

8.18 The FA approves certain types of AGP for use in competitive fixtures (those listed on the FA 3G Pitch register[1]) and the FA National Football Facilities Strategy recognises the role that these facilities play football. With the 2024 – 2028 FA strategy reporting that pitch quality is the biggest

[1] https://footballfoundation.org.uk/3g-pitch-register?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIi8qxgu_q9gIVzbTtCh2CsQPwEAAYASABEgKhHfD_BwE

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barrier to participation in football, effective provision of 3G AGPs, alongside high quality grass pitches are viewed as essential if demand is to be met.

8.19 Darlington currently contains six full sized AGPs which represents an increase of 1 since the previous PPS. These are summarised in Table 8.2. Of these facilities, five have a 3G surface and are therefore suitable for football. All of these pitches are on the FA 3G Pitch Register and are therefore able to sustain competitive activity as well as training. As identified in Section 7, none of these pitches are World Rugby Compliant and therefore cannot be used for rugby union.

8.20 A further small sized 3G AGP is provided at Darlington Education Village was built in 2020– this cannot accommodate full sized football but the 3G surface means that it can be used for training and smaller sized demand.

Table 8.2 – AGPs

Site Name	Surface	Pitch Size	FA Pitch Register	Quality Rating	Access
Middlesbrough Fc (Rockliffe Park)	3G	105m x 68m	Expires 31/05/2029	Good	Not available for community use
Eastbourne Sports Complex	3G	95m x 60m	Expires 31/05/2027	Good	Secured community use
Eastbourne Sports Complex	3G	100m x 64m	Expires 31/05/2027	Good quality. Approved for Womens Football Pyramid and NLS football	Secured community use
Hummersknott Academy	3G	100m x 64m	Expires 31/05/2027	Good	Secured community use
Carmel College	Sand		n/a	Good	Secured community use
Longfield Academy	3G	100m x 64m	Expires 31/05/2026	Standard	Secured community use

Pitch Quality and Changing Accommodation

8.21 All local leagues require clubs to keep their grounds in playable condition (and deemed suitable by the Management Committee). As in the 2021 PPS, the majority of clubs play within the Teesside Junior Football Alliance, where clubs must provide a home ground for all of their matches that is suitable for play. Pitch quality directly impacts on the capacity of a pitch, and therefore has significant impact on how well facilities meet demand.

8.22 Pitch quality is therefore an essential component of an effective pitch stock and has been a key focus of recent sports facility strategies in Darlington. The presence and quality of changing facilities, particularly to meet safeguarding requirements is also a factor in the suitability of pitches and a lack and / or inappropriate of facilities can impact on the desirability of grounds.

8.23 Most recently, the growth of female participation is placing extra pressures on both pitch and ancillary facilities, and there is a need to ensure that there are appropriate facilities available to support all players. The provision of pitches of appropriate quality and changing accommodation is therefore as important as the number of pitches.

8.24 Pitch quality in Darlington has been assessed through a variety of methods, specifically;

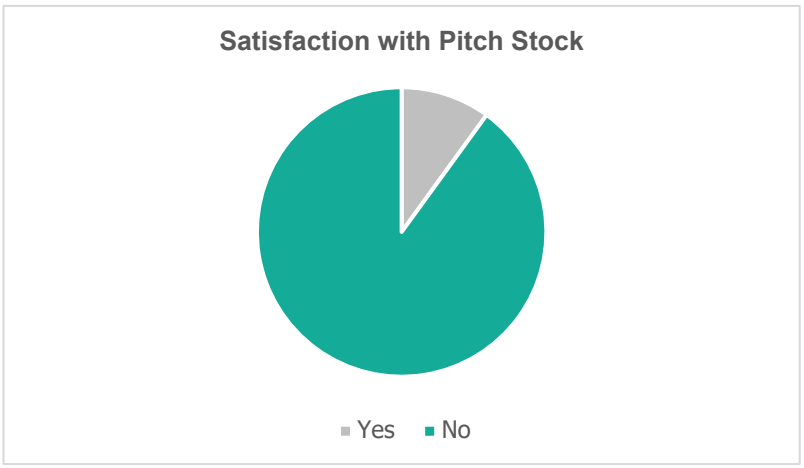
- Consultations with Clubs (95% of teams represented)
- Non-technical site assessments
- Review of Football Foundation PitchPower reports
- Consultation with schools and other key providers
- Discussion with key stakeholders, including Durham FA and Football Foundation.

8.25 Final views on the quality of each site have been reached through the triangulation of data. The key issues identified are explored in the sections that follow.

Views on the Pitch Stock

8.26 Chart 8.2 indicates that a high proportion of football clubs are dissatisfied with the infrastructure for football - just 10% of clubs are currently happy with the existing facilities.

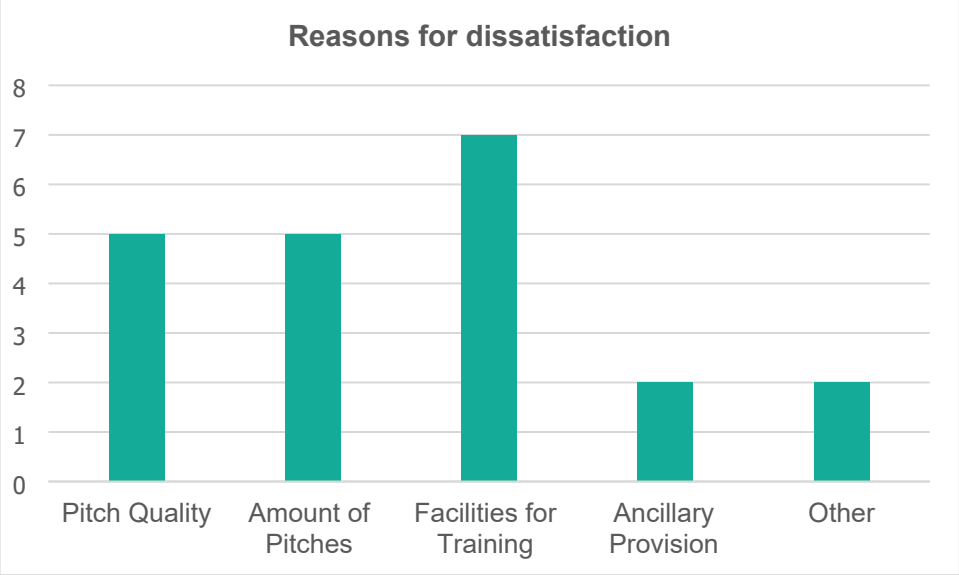
Chart 8.2 - Satisfaction with Pitch Provision



8.27 Multiple reasons were identified for the dissatisfaction that is evident. Chart 9.3 provides a general overview of these reasons, reporting that facilities for training remains the key challenge

in the view of clubs. 90% of clubs indicated that they were dissatisfied with access to facilities for training. Almost as many clubs are however also dissatisfied with the quality and amount of pitches for match play.

Chart 9.3 – Reasons for Dissatisfaction with Pitch Provision



8.28 Further detailed analysis of the responses behind the general overview confirms that in general, the issues raised remain the same as those reported in the 2021 PPS. In particular;

- The lack of 3G pitches is the most commonly reported issue – numerous clubs highlight that they struggle to access enough slots on 3G pitches for training. Clubs also believe that there is not enough capacity on 3G pitches to accommodate match play demand. Many cannot access any training time on AGPs (and 35 teams consequently travel out of the borough or use indoor venues) whilst others wish to secure more hours but there is none available. There is also extensive use of indoor sports halls for football training

- Clubs believe that there is a need to improve quality of grass pitches. Many sites suffer from waterlogging and poor grass coverage. In addition, the level of use on some sites is reported to be so high that maintenance is not felt adequate to keep up with demand.

- It is noted that smaller clubs find it particularly difficult to access facilities, with most of the AGPs supporting the activities of large partner clubs;

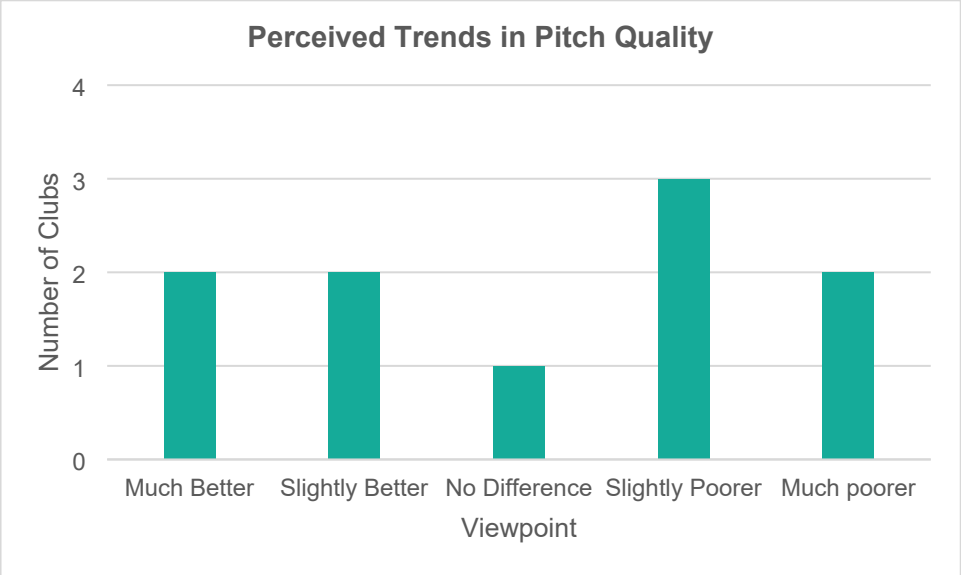
- The quality and availability of ancillary facilities at most sites is limited. For some clubs are impacting on the ability of the club to run women and girls football effectively.

8.29 Critically, it is evident from discussions with clubs that 3G AGPs is the preferred surface for the majority of clubs for both matches and training. This is due to the consistency that 3G pitches are perceived to offer regardless of the weather conditions.

8.30 Many clubs highlighted the issues that are often experienced on grass pitches during the winter months in Darlington. The 2021 PPS reported that clubs were particularly concerned about the deterioration of pitch quality. This was attributed to reducing maintenance programmes and increasing wear and tear of pitches.

8.31 While consultation suggests that many clubs recognise that improvements have taken place on several pitches in the last 5 years, Chart 8.4 demonstrates that there remains several clubs that believe that pitch quality is continuing to decline.

Chart 8.4 – Views on Trends in Pitch Quality



8.32 For sites where quality was perceived to have improved, this was primarily attributed to the increased maintenance that had been made possible by funding from the Football Foundation Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund. A high number of pitches in Darlington have benefitted from this.

8.33 The vast majority of clubs that were concerned about qualitative decline however cited overuse as the main cause, with many larger clubs suggesting that even where sites are supported by high quality maintenance programmes, the level of activity that takes place means that qualitative issues are almost inevitable.

8.34 Whilst some clubs also suggested that the maintenance of grass pitches has reduced since new 3G AGPs were created, this view is not necessarily supported by data supplied by providers.

8.35 To provide an overview of the perceived quality of grass pitches, Chart 8.5 summarises the average quality ratings attributed by clubs to each of the key features of pitches (an average score of 1 equates to poor, 2 to standard and 3 to good). It demonstrates that it is the drainage on pitches that is of greatest concern.

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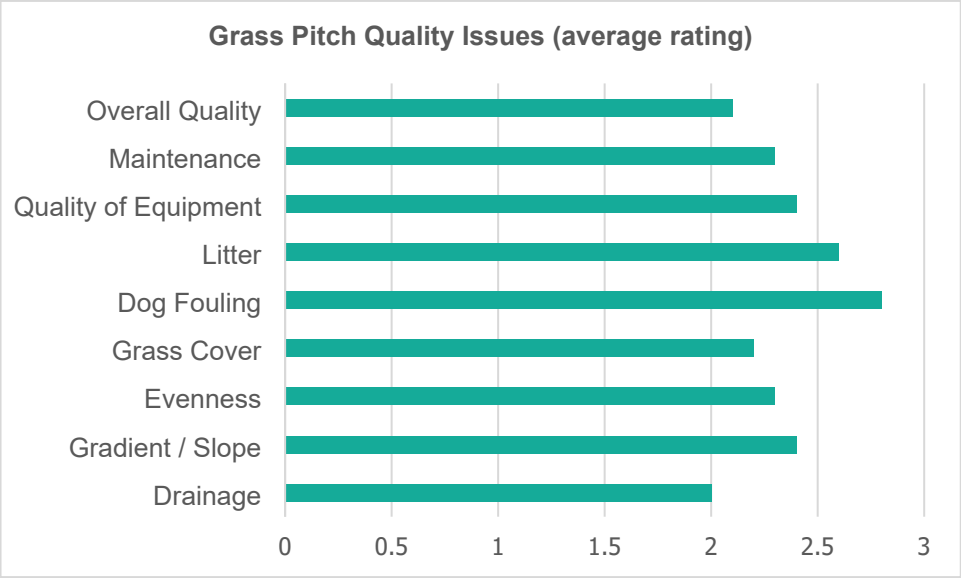
Chart 8.5 – Overall Views on Pitch Quality



8.36 Consultation with providers (including schools) reflected similar issues to those emerging from club consultation. It was evident that significant efforts are being put into the maintenance programmes at key football sites in order to sustain the high levels of play, but the high levels of rainfall that are experienced in the north east mean that drainage issues are evident on sites that are well maintained, as well as those that receive less intensive maintenance.

Site Assessments

8.37 Site visits were undertaken to all sites offering community access during December 2025. As such the results are reflective of usage for pitches that are halfway through the winter season at a time when the weather is most challenging. The key findings of these visits were that;

- Reflecting the key findings of club consultation, as well as the position identified in both the 2015 and 2021 and SFS, waterlogging and compaction was evident on many pitches in the Borough. The drainage issues were exacerbated by the compaction and some pitches also suffered from areas of undulation. The majority of pitches viewed would benefit from decompaction and reseeding
- Pitch quality remained low on sites that are open for recreational usage – some examples of misuse were identified that had arisen from informal activity. A small number of pitches were also suffering from site specific issues, such as moles and rabbits;
- It was clear that many sites had improved since 2021, with better grass coverage and fewer drainage issues identified than at that time. Site visits clearly demonstrated several examples of good quality multi pitch sites that receive strong levels of maintenance. These are not exclusive to club bases, with some school sites and Eastbourne Sports Complex amongst the highest quality facilities. Even on these sites during the winter months however, it was clear to see that there are challenges with maintaining quality week in and week out
- Reflecting the comments made during consultation, heavy usage was evident on many of the grass pitches. It was clear however that on sites where AGPs were available, these were supporting the grass pitches effectively, with the large amounts of use transferred onto these

pitches helping to reduce the use of the grass during the winter months. Overuse however appeared to be the main cause of many of the challenges identified

- As in 2021, the condition of associated ancillary facilities varies but there remain many sites where facilities need improvement.

8.38 Further information is provided at a site specific level later in this section.

PitchPower Reports

8.39 PitchPower is the Football Foundations web-app tool for assessing quality. It has been developed in partnership with the Grounds Management Association (GMA) and provides a technical assessments of grass pitches and recommendations to improve quality. It is accessible to all pitch providers, including local authorities.

8.40 PitchPower assessments provide a Performance Quality Standard (PQS) rating for each pitch on a scale of poor / basic / good / advanced / high and is the gateway to and a requirement of funding from the Football Foundation.

8.41 PitchPower assessments can also suggest where there are requirements for new and improved machinery to assist in maintenance efforts and seek to provide clear guidance to clubs on the improvements that are required. Funding is available for users of PitchPower from the Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund (subject to eligibility, not inclusive of local authorities) and consultation demonstrated that this fund is perceived to have already been instrumental in improving grass pitch quality in Darlington.

8.42 PitchPower assessments classify pitches into standards for community football relating to their playability. These are illustrated in Figure 8.6.

Figure 8.6 – Categories of Pitch Power Rating

High	Excellent for community football or elite
Advanced	Pitch considered good for community football
Good	Pitch meets desired standard for community football
Basic	Pitch requires improvement
Poor	Pitch requires significant improvement

8.43 The ratings achieved in PitchPower Assessments can be directly translated to quality ratings set out in the PPS guidance as follows;

- PitchPower rating poor – poor quality
- Pitch Power rating basic – standard quality
- Pitch Power rating high, good or advanced – good quality.

8.44 There has been strong engagement with the PitchPower process in Darlington in recent years and the vast majority of sites now have been assessed.

8.45 These assessments demonstrate that while there is some disparity in the quality of community football pitches, with ratings awarded ranging from advanced to poor, 51 % of pitches achieved scores of good or advanced, the level required to meet the needs of community football teams. This creates a positive picture of quality in the Borough, and a significantly improved position from 2021.

8.46 Almost 10% of pitches assessed through PitchPower however achieved poor pitch quality ratings, emphasising that there remains room for improvement.

Quality Summary

8.47 In line with guidance set out in Sport England's Playing Pitch Strategy guidance, the above combination of consultation, site visits and analysis of PitchPower Assessments have therefore been used to determine a quality rating for each of the grass pitches in the Borough as either good, standard or poor.

8.48 Where available, as the most technical source of assessment used, we have relied on the PitchPower ratings as the measure of pitch quality. Where PitchPower assessments were not available, the findings of the non technical site assessments, coupled with club feedback have been used as a measure of pitch quality. All ratings have been agreed with Durham FA.

8.49 These ratings, as well as issues specific to each site are outlined later in this section. Overall however the key messages arising from in relation to quality are;

- The good pitches (half of the pitch stock overall) are spread across several sites - Eastbourne Sports complex, Hummersknott Academy, Longfield Academy, Priory Hurworth House, Hurworth School, Darlington FC, Blackwell Meadows and Darlington RA, Staindrop Road and Teesside Airport all have some good quality pitches.
- Many of the sites that are poor quality are on public recreation grounds, where informal activity conflicts with formal play. These are Red Hall Community Centre, St George Playing Field, Tommy Crooks Park
- Quality issues are also experienced on some pitches at Teesside Airport Playing Fields and St Aidans Church of England Academy – the Durham County Football Association are already working alongside clubs to provide maintenance support to improve these
- Drainage (often caused by compaction) remains the biggest concern in the Borough – there is a need for ongoing decompaction and aeration works alongside tailored maintenance programmes at each pitch
- There are concerns that the maintenance programmes on some sites are strong, but are not sufficient to address the heavy usage that is experienced. This also impacts on the grass coverage
- There are issues with the quality / availability of changing facilities on some sites.

8.50 The issues raised during the assessment of quality undertaken as part of this PPS are similar to those identified in the previous PPS in 2021, although it is clear that significant improvement has taken place.

Quality of AGPs

8.51 All full sized 3G pitches in Darlington are listed on the FA 3G Pitch Register. The pitch at Longfield Academy will however require a retest in early summer this year and feedback suggests that the pitch is reaching the end of it's lifespan and consequently may not pass. Consultation with Longfield Academy however confirms that this pitch will be resurfaced during the summer of 2026 and then will be tested. Consequently, by the end of the school summer holidays it is anticipated that the site will return to being good quality, and in line with the standards required for inclusion on the FA 3G Pitch Register.

Demand

8.52 Football is the biggest sport in terms of the number of teams that are playing in the Borough. As in 2021, teams affiliate to Durham County Football Association.

8.53 Table 8.3 summarises the number of Darlington based community teams affiliated to clubs that are based within the Borough in season 2025 - 2026. It demonstrates that there has been

significant increase since the PPS in 2021, with 198 teams now playing in Darlington compared to 159 in 2021 (an increase of 24%). 3 walking football teams are also affiliated in addition to the numbers recorded in Table 8.4.

8.54 An additional 20 teams are exported from Darlington (primarily due to participation in central venue leagues run by Russell Foster Youth League).

8.55 The only exported club is Darlington Revolution, who play at Kings Academy, Middlesbrough. It is understood that the club originated in Darlington, but that they are now comfortably accommodated within Middlesborough and have no facility requirements in Darlington.

Table 8.3 – Teams Playing in Darlington

Team Type	Male	Female	Exported	2026 Totals	2021 Totals
Adult 11v11	27	9	1	37	40
Youth 11v11	44	11	2	57	36
9v9	29	11		40	28
7v7	31 (mixed)	2	8	41	29
5v5	29 (mixed)	5	9	43	26
Total	160	38		218	159

8.56 Table 8.3 demonstrates that with the exception of adult football, there has been growth in all forms of the game. Particular increases are demonstrated in youth and 9v9 play.

8.57 Interestingly, affiliation data recorded by Durham FA over the past three seasons demonstrates greater fluctuation and different trends. It reveals an increase in participation in adult football, and a small drop in youth 11v11 and 9v9 participation.

8.58 Club consultation reflects the messages portrayed by the data included in the PPS. It suggests that adult participation is relatively static, but 80% of responding clubs are now experiencing growth in mini football and 60% have also seen the number of teams within junior age groups grow. This is illustrated in Chart 8.7.

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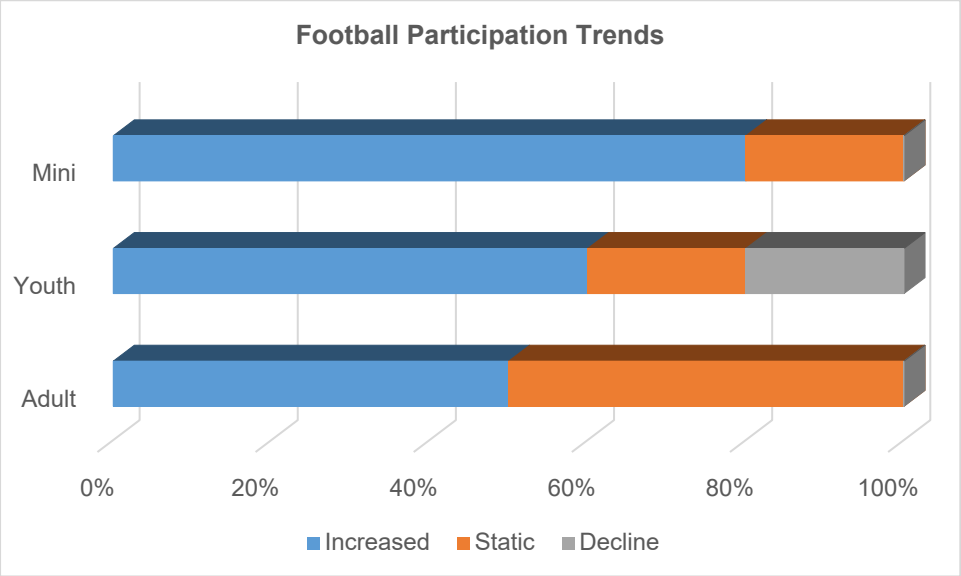
Chart 8.7 – Football Participation Trends

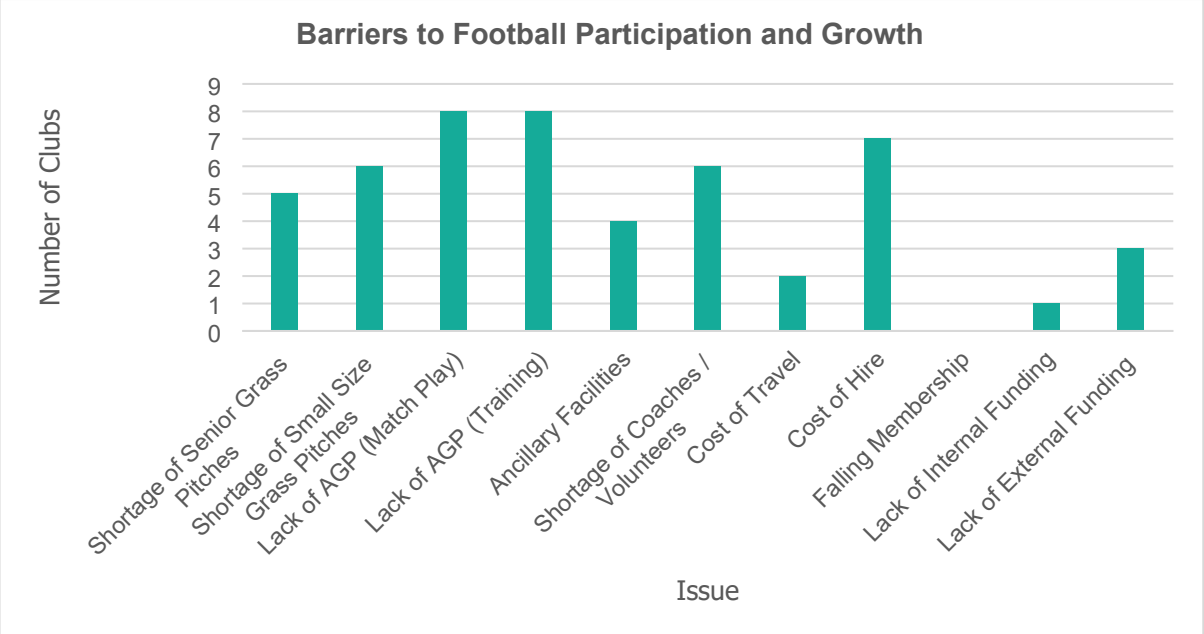


8.59 This therefore presents a continuing positive picture for football participation in Darlington, with football continuing to grow. It is clear however that the growth in participation will have placed additional pressures on the grass pitch infrastructure.

8.60 Crucially, almost all large clubs (10) report that they wish to create further teams, with the majority focusing on the inclusion of additional girls teams and development squads. This suggests that demand for football in the borough has not yet reached it's peak.

8.61 Chart 8.8 demonstrates that from a club perspective, a shortage of 3G AGPs for both matches and training is perceived to be the key barrier to achieving this growth.

Chart 8.8 - Barriers to Growth of Football



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Other Demand

Curricular Use

8.62 All of the secondary schools in the Borough have their own facilities and reflecting the position in previous PPS, most offer strong community use programmes.

8.63 Whilst curricular and extracurricular use typically does not take place at peak time for community bookings, this usage does reduce the amount of community use that can be sustained without creating overplay. This is crucial, as school facilities are critical in providing for the needs of community clubs (as documented in Chart 8.1).

Casual Use

8.64 Casual use is a feature of some of the playing fields that are located on parks sites. This dual functionality impacts on the quality of some pitches, with site visits identifying instances of inappropriate use. This use is not sufficiently extensive to reduce capacity of pitches, although it is important that the overall impact on player experience is taken into account.

Training Demand

8.65 Almost all clubs use AGPs for midweek training during the winter months although there is some use of indoor venues. All full sized 3G AGPs are heavily used, and the Education Village and Soccer Sensations are also important training venues. 35 teams report either travelling outside of Darlington or using other facilities.

8.66 The challenges accessing 3G AGPs however as a result of the perceived lack of provision emerged as the key issue for clubs. Several clubs struggle to get any time on AGPs, whilst others do not have enough hours to adequately meet the needs of their teams.

8.67 There is very little use of grass pitches for training, although this increases during the summer months.

National League System (NLS)

8.68 Teams playing within the National League System (NLS) must adhere to specific requirements in relation to the facilities provided at the home ground. If a club continues to progress up the pyramid, requirements and regulations for facilities will become more onerous and a club may lose the opportunity to be promoted if their facilities do not meet the necessary standards. The Ground Grading requirements are set out in full at https://www.thefa.com/get-involved/player/ground-grading.

8.69 Darlington FC is the highest performing club in Darlington, with the team currently playing in The National League North (Step 2 of the National League System (NLS)).

8.70 Until 2012, Darlington FC played at the Darlington Arena. Following a relocation, the club first team now play at Blackwell Meadows, which has a capacity of just over 3000. The club share the use of the stadia pitch with Darlington RFC and their other teams (including a junior set up) play at other venues, including Eastbourne Sports Complex.

8.71 Whilst the club have now played at Blackwell Meadows for 14 years, they continue to explore options to secure their long term future. There is a need to ensure that they have capacity to grow and progress firstly within the NLS, but also into the Football League (which is only two promotions away). In addition, there is a need to ensure that the club's training requirements are met. Overall, there is also a need for greater certainty as to their future plans, so that facilities can be tailored to their needs, as well as clarity provided for the rugby clubs hosting the football. In particular, the club are now working to establish where an AGP can be provided to service

their needs (as well as the needs of their junior / younger teams). Meeting the ongoing requirements of Darlington FC will therefore be a critical part of this strategy.

8.72 Darlington Town FC are the next highest performing club, playing in Division 2 of the Northern League (Step 6). This team are based on one of the AGPs at Eastbourne Sports Complex (pitch2), which is FIFA accredited and is approved for use in the National League System (up to Step 3) as well as in the Women's Football pyramid (Tier 3). A FIFA QP pitch would be required should any team progress further than Step 2, and a grass pitch must be used if a Women's team was to progress to Tier 1.

8.73 In addition to the needs of the above clubs, three teams play in the North Riding Football League and two in the Wearside Football League. The top divisions in these leagues are feeder leagues into the NLS. Teams playing in these leagues may therefore require facilities meeting ground grading standards longer term if they have aspirations for progression and successfully achieve promotion. Pitch 2 at Eastbourne Sports Complex provides the resource that these clubs may potentially need in the first instance, should promotion aspirations be achieved.

Adequacy of Pitch Provision – Assessing Supply and Demand

8.74 As noted in Section 2, a new PPS methodology is currently being developed. We are not aware at this time of any changes to the calculation process and consequently the assessment has been undertaken using the existing adopted methodology.

8.75 This methodology evaluates the adequacy of provision by taking into account both the quality and number of pitches provided and measuring this against the demand for a pitch. Adequacy is measured both over the course of a week and at peak time using the concept of match equivalent sessions (MES)[2]. There is a strong interrelationship between the quality of a pitch and the amount of use that it can sustain.

8.76 It is important to note that pitch totals and patterns of play change regularly – figures are therefore indicative and represent a picture of a sample weekend.

Weekly Capacity

8.77 The quality of the pitch directly impacts the number of MES per week that can be sustained. Table 8.4 summarises the guidelines used with regards pitch capacity (extracted from Sport England Guidance on the Production of a Playing Pitch Strategy, prepared by the FA).

Table 8.4 - Capacity based upon Pitch Quality

Agreed pitch quality rating	Adult Football	Youth Football	Mini Soccer
	Number of match equivalent sessions a week		
Good	3	4	6
Standard	2	2	4
Poor	1	1	2

Peak Time Demand

8.78 Peak time demand is determined by evaluating the number of match equivalent sessions at peak time and comparing it to the number of pitches available. Peak time is deemed to be the

[2] A match equivalent session refers to the number of matches that a team will play weekly on a pitch. For example, one football team will usually play at home fortnightly. Demand from this team will therefore equate to 0.5 match equivalent sessions weekly. If the team also trains on a grass pitch, this too will be measured and recorded in match equivalent sessions.

period in which the most play on that pitch type takes place. A pitch can only be considered to have spare capacity at peak time when it is not already utilised to its full capacity over the course of a week (i.e., can sustain additional play without detrimental impact on the pitch).

8.79 The patterns of play in Darlington Borough remain the same as in 2021;

- Senior Pitches – the peak time remains Sunday morning, with most adult teams playing in the Darlington Sunday Invitation league. Play on adult pitches is more spread across the weekend than other forms of football, with evidence of participation in all time slots. Since 2021 the proportion of play that takes place on a Sunday has however increased. Now circa 50% of play on senior pitches takes place at peak time
- Junior Pitches – Most youth football takes place on a Sunday morning (sometimes early afternoon), with teams playing in the Teesside Junior Football Alliance League (TJFA). Fixtures in this league can be timed flexibly where necessary on the assumption that both teams agree, to maximise the use of pitches. All play is typically complete by early afternoon
- 9v9 Pitches–peak time for 9v9 is Sunday morning, with participation again focused on the TJFA. although a small amount takes place on a Sunday afternoon, again primarily due to the need to stagger kick off times.
- 5v5 and 7v7 pitches - peak day is a Sunday morning, with almost all teams again playing in the TJFA.

8.80 Fixtures for The Russell Foster League take place on a Saturday morning and some clubs choose to enter teams into both this league alongside the TJFA to spread play given the challenges securing a venue on a Sunday. This league uses many central venues outside of Darlington.

8.81 The above therefore indicates that demand in Darlington Borough is concentrated with a high proportion of play occurring on a Sunday. This concentration of play means that a higher number of pitches are required to accommodate the teams that wish to play than if activity was more spread. There is however good flexibility in relation to the kick-off time, meaning that fixtures can be staggered within the Sunday peak period.

Competitive Demand on 3G AGPs

8.82 With all of the full sized 3G AGPs listed on the FA 3G Pitch Register, they are approved for match play and can therefore be used by teams to take the pressures off the grass pitches. Provider consultation suggests that AGPs are now typically used to maximum capacity on each match day to minimise the pressures on the grass pitches. Consultation reveals that clubs prefer to play on the 3G to avoid any quality issues and minimise the likelihood of cancellation.

8.83 Several clubs have access to both 3G AGP and grass pitches and also rotate their teams across these venues according to availability / fixtures / condition of pitches / attempts to avoid overplay on grass pitches etc. In producing these calculations therefore, we have allocated teams across AGP and grass pitches based on typical patterns of play to represent an approximate breakdown of demand. The spread of play has been discussed and agreed with representatives of both Durham FA and Darlington BC.

Grass Pitches – Situation at Individual Sites

8.84 Table 8.5 provides an overview of activity at each site. It sets out the current supply and demand and outlines whether the pitch is being overplayed, played to the appropriate level or is able to sustain additional fixtures. Adequacy of provision is measured in Match Equivalent Sessions

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(MES), either per week or at peak time. Overplay is demonstrated by minus figures (i.e. demand exceeds supply).

8.85 Issues relating to grass pitches will be explored by pitch type, however the key issues emerging from site overviews are as follows;

- Looking firstly at the capacity that is available across the whole week, there is a degree of spare capacity on most grass pitches and limited overplay. 72 pitches have some degree of spare capacity available. This is influenced by the high demand at peak time (and hence fewer numbers of teams requiring access to grass pitches in other time slots);
- Larger hub sites are heavily played, with very limited spare capacity remaining. Most of the football hubs accommodate all of the teams of one or more large football club. It is clear however that whilst there are substantial amounts of play taking place at Easbourne Sports Complex, Hummersknott Academy and Longfield Academy, the availability of the 3G AGP has successfully reduced the pressures on the grass pitches at these sites, particularly in relation to smaller sided football. There is however overplay on at least one pitch at Eastbourne Sports Complex and Hummersknott (along with St Aidans Church of England Academy) indicating that AGPs have not fully absorbed all of the demand
- Whilst there is heavy play on multiple sites, there remain some sites that are unused for a variety of reasons. Issues with car parking at Staindrop Road means that this site (which includes good quality grass pitches) have been unused this season, whilst pitches at Teesside Airport are not used during the winter months, as work is still underway to improve these pitches and the club therefore use pitches at Eastbourne Sports Complex to maximise the probability of playable pitches. There are also numerous schools that offer only limited pitches (alongside no ancillary provision) that are also available but not used. These include West Park Academy, Heighington C of E Primary, Polam Hall School and, Gurney Pease Academy. Much of the spare capacity this identified is therefore located on sites that are less desirable for one reason or another. The lack of use at Carmel College is perhaps more surprising however, as the site offers three pitches and therefore represents a good opportunity for clubs to accommodate their demand.
- Several of the poor quality pitches also receive restricted use (0.5 – 1 MES weekly). Sites where this is the case include Springfield, St George Playing Field, Tommy Crooks Park, Skerne Park Community Centre and North Park.
- While it is clear therefore that across the week, there is capacity for additional play, it is evident that much of the spare capacity is on sites that less effectively respond to the demand that is identified. Peak time demand is however much more tightly constrained and at some sites, pitches are used for several consecutive games in order to accommodate the number of teams with fixtures. 35 pitches have actual spare capacity at peak time, but critically, the majority of sites accommodating large clubs have much more limited (if any) remaining capacity at peak time. This means that like the demand across the week, most of the spare capacity is at sites that are less desirable to clubs (either poor quality or a small site that cannot accommodate many of their teams)

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Table 8.5 – Site Overviews

Site Name	Management	Number of Pitches	Facility Type	Access	Quality Rating	Ancillary Rating	Capacity	All Usage (MES)	Capacity (all use)	Actual Spare Capacity at Peak Time	Overplay at Peak Time	Position
Staindrop Road Playing Field	DBC	2	adult 11v11	Secured	Good	Poor (no facilities)	6	0	6	2		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Mount Pleasant Primary School	Education	1	5v5	Unsecured	Standard (low)		4	1.5	2.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Mount Pleasant Primary School	Education	1	7v7	Unsecured	Standard (low)		4	1.5	2.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Darlington Education Village	Education	2	adult 11v11	Secured	Standard (low)	Standard	4	2.5	1.5	1.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Darlington Education Village	Education	3	Youth 11v11	Secured	Standard (low)	Standard	6	6	0	0		Played to level pitch can sustain
Darlington Education Village	Education	1	9v9	Secured	Standard (low)	Standard	2	2	0	0		Played to level pitch can sustain
Darlington Education Village	Education	1	7v7	Secured	Standard (low)	Standard	4	1	3	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Teesside Airport Playing Fields	Club	1	Youth 11v11	Secured	Poor	Poor	1	0	1	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Teesside Airport Playing Fields	Club	1	9v9	secured	Good	Poor	4	0	4	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Teesside Airport Playing Fields	Club	1	7v7	secured	Poor	Poor	2	0	2	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play

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Site Name	Management	Number of Pitches	Facility Type	Access	Quality Rating	Ancillary Rating	Capacity	All Usage (MES)	Capacity (all use)	Actual Spare Capacity at Peak Time	Overplay at Peak Time	Position
Teesside Airport Playing Fields	Club	2	5v5	secured	1 standard, 1 good	Poor	10	0.5	9.5	2		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
West Park Academy	Education	1	Youth 11v11	Unsecured	Standard (low)		2	1	1	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Heighington C Of E Primary School	Education	1	7v7	Unsecured	standard		4	1	3	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Saint George Playing Field	Parish Council	1	adult 11v11	Secured	Poor	Poor	1	0.5	0.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Hurworth School	Education	2	adult 11v11	secured	Good	Standard	6	2.5	3.5	2		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Eastbourne Sports Complex	DBC	1	adult 11v11	secured	Good	Good (but some minor issues raised)	3	0.5	2.5	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Eastbourne Sports Complex	DBC	1	Youth 11v11	secured	Good	Good (but some minor issues raised)	4	3	1	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play (but not at peak time)
Eastbourne Sports Complex	DBC	1	9v9	secured	Good	Good (but some minor issues raised)	4	4.5	-0.5	0	0.5	Overplayed

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Site Name	Management	Number of Pitches	Facility Type	Access	Quality Rating	Ancillary Rating	Capacity	All Usage (MES)	Capacity (all use)	Actual Spare Capacity at Peak Time	Overplay at Peak Time	Position
Eastbourne Sports Complex	DBC	1	7v7	secured	Good	Good (but some minor issues raised)	6	1	5	0		Played to level pitch can sustain
Eastbourne Sports Complex	DBC	1	5v5	secured	Good	Good (but some minor issues raised)	6	0.5	5.5	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Tommy Crooks Park	DBC	1	adult 11v11	secured	Poor	Poor (no facilities)	1	0.5	0.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
North Park	DBC	1	adult 11v11	secured	Standard	Standard	2	0.5	1.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Springfield	DBC	1	adult 11v11	secured	Standard	Poor (no facilities)	2	1	1	0		Spare capacity, but not at peak time
Polam Hall School	Education	1	adult 11v11	Unsecured	Standard		2	1	1	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Skerne Park Community Centre	Education	1	adult 11v11	secured	Standard (low)	Standard	2	0.5	1.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Hummersknott Academy	Education	1	9v9	secured	Good	Good (although restricted if users of more than 1 pitch require	4	2.5	1.5	0		No spare capacity at peak time

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Site Name	Management	Number of Pitches	Facility Type	Access	Quality Rating	Ancillary Rating	Capacity	All Usage (MES)	Capacity (all use)	Actual Spare Capacity at Peak Time	Overplay at Peak Time	Position
						changing)						
Hummersknott Academy	Education	2	adult 11v11	secured	2 x good, 1 x poor	Standard to good	4.6	4	0.6	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Hummersknott Academy	Education	1	Youth 11v11	secured	Good	Standard to good	4	5	-1	0	1	Overplayed
Hummersknott Academy	Education	1	7v7	secured	Good	Standard to good	6	1	5	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Hummersknott Academy	Education	1	5v5	secured	Good	Standard to good	6	1	5	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
St Aidans Church Of England Academy	Education	2	Youth 11v11	secured	Standard	Standard	4	8.5	-4.5	0	4.5	Overplayed
St Aidans Church Of England Academy	Education	1	7v7	secured	Standard	Standard	4	3	1	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but none available at peak time
St Aidans Church Of England Academy	Education	1	5v5	secured	Poor	Standard	2	3	-1	0	1	Overplayed
St Aidans Church Of England Academy	Education	1	9v9	secured	Good	Standard	4	3	1	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but none available at peak time
Priory Hurworth House Playing Fields	Club	1	Youth 11v11	secured	Good	Poor	4	3	1	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but

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Site Name	Management	Number of Pitches	Facility Type	Access	Quality Rating	Ancillary Rating	Capacity	All Usage (MES)	Capacity (all use)	Actual Spare Capacity at Peak Time	Overplay at Peak Time	Position
												none available at peak time
Priory Hurworth House Playing Fields	Club	1	9v9	secured	Standard	Poor	2	1.5	0.5	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but none available at peak time
Priory Hurworth House Playing Fields	Club	1	7v7	secured	Standard	Poor	4	0.5	3.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Priory Hurworth House Playing Fields	Club	1	5v5	secured	Standard	Poor	4	2	2	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but none available at peak time
Carmel College	Education	3	adult 11v11	Unsecured	Standard		6	3	3	3		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Gurney Pease Academy	Education	2	7v7	Unsecured	Standard		8	2	6	2		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Longfield Academy	Education	1	9v9	secured	Good	Poor	4	2	2	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but none available at peak time
Longfield Academy	Education	1	Youth 11v11	secured	Standard		2	1	1	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Longfield Academy	Education	4	adult 11v11	secured	1 x good, 3 x standard		9	7	2	2		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Longfield Academy	Education	1	7v7	secured	standard		4	2	2	0		Spare capacity to accommodate

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Site Name	Management	Number of Pitches	Facility Type	Access	Quality Rating	Ancillary Rating	Capacity	All Usage (MES)	Capacity (all use)	Actual Spare Capacity at Peak Time	Overplay at Peak Time	Position
												additional play, but none available at peak time
Longfield Academy	Education	2	5v5	secured	1 poor, 1 standard		6	3.5	2.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Heighington Playing Fields	Club	1	adult 11v11	secured	Good	Standard	3	2	1	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Heighington Playing Fields	Club	1	Youth 11v11	secured	Good		4	0	4	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Heighington Playing Fields	Club	1	9v9	secured	Good		4	1.5	2.5	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but none available at peak time
South Park (Darlington)	DBC	1	5v5	secured	Good	Poor (no facilities)	6	0	6	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Darlington Rugby Football Club / Blackwell Meadows	Club	1	adult 11v11	secured	Good	Good for main pitch, poor for other pitches	3	1	2	0		Spare capacity, but not at peak time
Darlington Rugby Football Club / Blackwell Meadows	Club	2	adult 11v11	secured	Good		6	3.5	2.5	0		Spare capacity, but not at peak time
Darlington Rugby Football Club /	Club	2	9v9	secured	Good		8	1.5	6.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play

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Site Name	Management	Number of Pitches	Facility Type	Access	Quality Rating	Ancillary Rating	Capacity	All Usage (MES)	Capacity (all use)	Actual Spare Capacity at Peak Time	Overplay at Peak Time	Position
Blackwell Meadows												
Darlington Rugby Football Club / Blackwell Meadows	Club	2	5v5	secured	Good		12	1.5	10.5	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Darlington Rugby Football Club / Blackwell Meadows	Club	1	7v7	secured	Good		6	2	4	0		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play, but none available at peak time
Darlington Railway Athletic Sports And Social Club	Club	1	adult 11v11	secured	Standard	Poor	2	1.5	0.5	0.5		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Darlington Railway Athletic Sports And Social Club	Club	5	5v5	secured	Good		30	2.5	27.5	3		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play
Darlington Railway Athletic Sports And Social Club	Club	3	7v7	secured	Good		18	2	16	1		Spare capacity to accommodate additional play

8.86 The site overviews set out in Table 8.5 provide an understanding of the situation at individual sites. Table 8.6 summarises the data provided in Table 8.5 and provides a headline of the spare capacity at each site across the week and at peak time.

8.87 The key used in this table is set out below.

	Site overplayed in this age group
	Site played to level it can sustain
	Potential to accommodate more play - and used already for play
	Pitches not used by the community during winter season 2025 / 2026
X	**No available capacity at peak time**

Table 8.6 - Summary of Site and Pitch Availability

Site Name	Access	Adult 11v11	Youth 11v11	9v9	7v7	5v5	Quality Rating / Comment
Staindrop Road Playing Field	Secured						Good
Mount Pleasant Primary School	Unsecured						Standard
Darlington Education Village	Secured		x	x			Standard
Teesside Airport Playing Fields	Secured						Youth poor, 9v9 good. 7v7 poor, 5 v 5 standard and good
West Park Academy	Unsecured						Standard
Heighington C Of E Primary School	Unsecured						Standard
Saint George Playing Field	Secured						Poor
Hurworth School	Secured						Good
Eastbourne Sports Complex	Secured		x	x	x		Good
Tommy Crooks Park	Secured						Poor
North Park	Secured						Standard
Springfield	Secured	x					Standard
Polam Hall School	Unsecured						Standard
Skerne Park Community Centre	Secured						Standard
Hummersknott Academy	Secured		x	x			Good (one poor adult pitch)
St Aidans Church Of England Academy	Secured		x	x	x	x	Good (9v9), standard (youth and 7v7) Poor (5v5)

Site Name	Access	Adult 11v11	Youth 11v11	9v9	7v7	5v5	Quality Rating / Comment
Priory Hurworth House Playing Fields	Secured		x	x	x	x	Good (youth 11v11) remaining pitches standard
Carmel College	Secured						Standard
Gurney Pease Academy	Unsecured						Standard
Longfield Academy	Secured			x	x		Good (1 adult 11v11, 1 9v9), standard (3 youth 11v11, 7v7 and 1 5v5) 1 x poor 5v5
Heighington Playing Fields	Secured			x			Good
South Park (Darlington)	Secured						Good
Darlington Rugby Football Club	Secured	x					Good
Darlington Railway Athletic Sports And Social Club	Secured	x					Standard (adult) with good mini pitches

8.88 The above site specific overviews can be amalgamated to provide a picture of the Borough wide position. Table 8.7 therefore summarises the overall picture for Darlington.

8.89 For each pitch type it considers three different positions;

- The amount of spare capacity that is available across the week and at peak time taking into account all provision that is currently available to the community
- The position at peak time when any spare capacity that is unsecured is excluded
- The position at peak time when spare capacity at both poor quality sites and unsecured sites are excluded.

8.90 It should be noted that the figures presented take into account any overplay that is evident. To accurately compile the figures to reflect capacity across the week, all overplay identified has been deducted. To calculate the peak time spare capacity, we emphasise that sites with overplay across the week cannot offer spare capacity at peak time (even if the pitch is technically available).

Table 8.7 – Overall Adequacy of Provision across Darlington

Pitch Type	Scenario	All Community Pitches (MES)	Excluding Spare Capacity at Unsecured Sites	Excluding Spare Capacity at Unsecured and Poor sites
Adult Pitches	Weekly Position	31	27	25.5
Adult Pitches	Peak Time	16	12	10.5
Youth Pitches	Weekly Position	3.5	2.5	1.5
Youth Pitches	Peak Time	-1.5	-2.5	-3.5
9v9	Weekly Position	17.5	17.5	17.5
9v9	Peak Time	1	1	1
7v7	Weekly Position	53	41.5	39.5
7v7	Peak Time	8	4.5	3.5
5v5	Weekly Position	70	67.5	66.5

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Pitch Type	Scenario	All Community Pitches (MES)	Excluding Spare Capacity at Unsecured Sites	Excluding Spare Capacity at Unsecured and Poor sites
5v5	Peak Time	10	9.5	9.5

8.91 Table 8.7, supported by site specific information in Table 8.6 therefore demonstrates that;

- There is adequate capacity overall for adult football, with spare capacity across the week and at peak time. It is evident however that some of this spare capacity is on poorer quality sites and that the quality of adult pitches is much lower than the quality of smaller pitches. Spare capacity at peak time remains adequate, but is reduced when poor quality and unsecured sites are eliminated
- There are insufficient youth pitches at peak time to meet demand, which reflects the challenges scheduling matches reported by clubs
- The availability of 9v9 pitches is also limited, with supply only just able to meet demand at peak time (1 MES spare capacity)
- There is greater availability on 7v7 and 5v5 pitches, in part due to increasing use of AGPs for smaller sided games. There are some pitches that are now rarely used (primarily those on sites that also contain AGPs) but clear pressures on other sites where there are no AGPs and large numbers of teams needing to play (for example Priory Hurworth House, St Aidans, Blackwell Meadows).

8.92 Overall, it is clear that as result of the participation increases that have taken place since the 2021 PPS, despite a clear improvement in the quality of provision which has significantly increased the number of matches that can be sustained, there remain capacity pressures particularly on youth 11v11 and 9v9 pitches.

8.93 Table 8.6 also identifies some issues with the adequacy of ancillary provision, with several sites offering either no provision or facilities that are insufficient to accommodate the number of pitches / balance of activity that takes place. Sites where provision is insufficient include;

- Darlington RA – ancillary facilities limited and in poor condition
- Saint George Playing Fields – no ancillary facilities provided
- Teesside Airport – restricted facilities – portaloo only
- Blackwell Meadows – lack of access to any facilities for community football teams
- Tommy Crooks Park – no facilities
- Springfield – no facilities
- Mount Pleasant Primary School – no facilities
- Staindrop Road – lack of parking means pitches are not used

8.94 Further detail relating to the adequacy of provision of each pitch type is provided below.

Adult Football Pitches (11 v 11)

8.95 Table 8.7 demonstrated that there is spare capacity on adult football pitches across the Borough as a whole, equating to 31 MES across the week. This reduces slightly when spare capacity at unsecured and poor quality sites is excluded, but even in this scenario, there remains 25.5 MES available.

8.96 At peak time there is also adequate capacity available on adult pitches (16 MES, reducing to 10.5 when excluding poor and unsecured sites). It should be noted that the pitch at Polam Hall will become secured following the recently approved school redevelopment works.

8.97 Whilst the composition of the adult pitch stock has changed since 2021 (with the addition of Staindrop Road and the loss of access to Wyvern Academy in particular), this mirrors the picture that was presented in the 2021 SFS.

8.98 Crucially, in 2026 there are now no adult football pitches that are overplayed and only two sites (Springfield and Darlington RFC) that have no spare capacity at peak time. This suggests that there remains enough capacity to meet demand for adult football in Darlington.

8.99 Despite this, many pitches are still busy. Table 8.6 shows that on the majority of sites, spare capacity equates to only 0.5 MES, with only Darlington Education Village, Eastbourne Sports Complex and Longfield Academy offering more than this.

8.100 It is clear however that the quality of adult football pitches is much poorer than other pitch types, with spare capacity significant reducing when poor quality pitches are excluded. Most of the teams playing in the Darlington Sunday Invitation League are using pitches at Council sites, all of which outside Eastbourne Sports Complex are of low standard to poor quality. Further reductions in maintenance and / or increased usage of these pitches would therefore start to generate pressures on the infrastructure for adult football, particularly if the growth that has taken place in younger age groups transitions through to adult football towards the end of this strategy period. Improvements to quality would add extra capacity outside of peak time, as well as improving player experience.

8.101 At both peak time and across the week as a whole, the amount of spare capacity available is heavily influenced by the lack of use of adult pitches at both Staindrop Road (2) and Carmel College (3) in particular. Issues with parking are preventing use of pitches at Staindrop Road (despite the pitches provided being high quality), whilst Carmel College has not been used for community football for years (despite reportedly being available). At sites that are used therefore, supply is more closely matched with demand than appears at first sight (and if these sites were excluded consideration, particularly when also excluding poor / unsecured pitches, supply actually very closely matches demand).

8.102 In addition, it should be highlighted that there is also a deficit of youth 11v11 football provision at peak time. The overlap in minimum / maximum dimensions between senior and youth football pitches means that there is a degree of cross over and that some of the spare capacity for adult football at the larger sites is used for youth football.

8.103 3G AGPs are typically used to accommodate younger teams, as several fixtures can be held on the pitch at any one time and matches can be accommodated flexibly. With kick off times typically less flexible for adult games, along with the pitch size meaning that one adult match uses the whole pitch, AGPs do not increase the amount of capacity that is available as much for adult play as for smaller formats of football.

8.104 A large proportion of adult football in Darlington therefore takes place on grass pitches. The second AGP at Eastbourne Sports Complex is however used to accommodate some adult football, and particularly female senior football on a Sunday afternoon. This pitch is fully accredited for use in the male NLS and the female football pyramid and consequently plays an important role in meeting this demand.

Youth 11v11 Football

8.105 The 2021 PPS identified a small amount of spare capacity in youth football (3 MES), which reduced to 1.5 MES when taking into account the quality of pitches.

8.106 Whilst some pitches have evidently improved in terms of quality (and consequently the capacity available across the week has increased), demand in this age group has also increased rapidly.

The qualitative improvements mean that many youth pitches in Darlington are able to sustain the maximum number of games that a grass pitch can, there is still only just enough capacity available to meet demand across the week when accounting for the overplay that is evident at Hummersknott Academy (1) and St Aidans C of E Academy (4.5 MES). Very few sites have any spare capacity outside of Heighington Playing Fields (which offers 4 MES) and there are no other sites with more than 1 MES spare.

8.107 Added to this, Table 8.7 confirms that supply is already unable to meet peak time demand (-1.5 MES). If spare capacity offered at poor quality and unsecured pitches is discounted, this increases further (to 3.5 MES).

8.108 This reflects the findings of consultation, which reported that there is a perceived shortage of 11v11 pitches for youth teams. Notably, there are 7.5 MES that cannot be accommodated without playing consecutive fixtures at peak time and there are particular pressures in this regard at St Aidans Academy, Eastbourne Sports Complex, Hummersknott Academy and Priory Hurworth House. This suggests that there are already challenges accommodating the required number of fixtures on sites accommodating large clubs and very limited opportunity to run more junior teams. There are few venues with spare capacity (West Park Academy, Teesside Airport (used summer only currently, Longfield Academy and Heighington Playing Fields).

8.109 It is inevitable given the deficiencies that some youth play will need to take place on adult pitches – whilst there is some spare capacity on adult 11v11 pitches overall, at most sites where there are pressures on the youth pitches there is also very limited available capacity on the adult pitches.

8.110 3G AGPs are now used for some youth football matches in Darlington, in particular at Eastbourne Sports Complex and Longfield Academy. There is potentially some scope to increase activity on the 3G AGP on a Sunday afternoon, but no further capacity available on a Sunday morning.

8.111 This means that overall, there is insufficient capacity in the existing infrastructure to accommodate the demand that is evident for youth football on specific 11v11 youth pitches. Even when taking into account the spare capacity that is available on adult pitches, it is clear that there are only just enough pitches, with combined spare capacity amounting to just 7 MES at peak time.

8.112 The increasing challenge in accommodating 11v11 youth football was a key theme of discussions with both clubs and with providers. Several clubs indicated that a lack of available pitches is starting to inhibit their growth and providers report challenges in scheduling the level of fixtures that are requested. Addressing this will therefore need to be a key part of the strategy moving forwards.

9 v 9 Pitches

8.113 Again Tables 8.6 and 8.7 reveal there is very limited spare capacity on 9v9 pitches at peak time (with just 1 MES spare capacity). There are no unsecured sites and no poor quality pitches, so this position is consistent in all scenarios considered.

8.114 Boroughwide, taking into account 0.5 MES overplay, spare capacity equates to 17.5 MES across the week. This reflects the strong focus on peak time demand for 9v9 play (with demand more limited outside of the Sunday AM window) and is a significant improvement on the position identified in 2021. The amount of capacity that is available during week is testament to the qualitative improvements that have taken place, which have enabled pitches to accommodate a higher number of games each week. At peak time however, pitches have a finite time based capacity.

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8.115 Crucially, with the exception of the pitches at Darlington Education Village and Priory Hurworth House (both rated standard), all 9v9 pitches are rated as good. This means that there is very little scope to improve capacity for 9v9 football through investment into qualitative improvements alone. Indeed the pressures at peak time suggest that it is addressing this that is the priority.

8.116 Whilst Hummersknott Academy is the only site to exhibit overplay across the week, it is clear that at peak time, matches are played back to back on pitches at Eastbourne Sports Complex and Priory Hurworth House. Scheduling of play to meet with league requirements is therefore very challenging.

8.117 At Eastbourne Sports Complex, the AGP are particularly important in sustaining 9v9 football, with Darlington RA, Middleton Rangers and Darlington Locomotives all regularly using AGP as well as grass 9v9 pitches. The AGP at Longfield Academy is also used to host 9v9 football for Darlington All Stars.

8.118 It is clear therefore that for 9v9 pitches, high demand at peak time is the cause of the identified pressures on the grass pitches and consequently there is a need to increase the capacity that is available for 9v9 play at this time. This reflects the findings of consultation, which identified challenges for clubs in finding enough pitches to support 9v9 play and for providers in meeting the evident demand.

7 v 7 Pitches

8.119 Across the week, there is significant spare capacity for 7v7 football on grass pitches (53 MES). Much of this spare capacity is however located at primary school sites that are both unsecured and unused by the local community. Mount Pleasant Primary School is the only unsecured venue that is used, and this site has hosted Mount Pleasant Juniors for several years now. This site, alongside the other primary schools, do not offer ancillary facilities or toilets and are therefore less desirable to clubs. If unsecured pitches, alongside poor pitches are removed, the amount of spare capacity across the week reduces, but is still high (39.5 MES).

8.120 This overall position reflects the position set out in the 2021 PPS, but as with other pitch types, the qualitative improvements that have taken place mean that the weekly capacity that is available is now higher.

8.121 That said, the increase in demand means that again at peak time, despite pitches offering a higher quality overall, supply is constrained. When spare capacity at the unsecured and poor quality sites is removed, at peak time just 3.5 MES are available.

8.122 Critically, it is evident that a large proportion of the spare capacity is located at sites where 3G pitch availability means that 7v7 and 5v5 pitches are no longer used. Pitches at both Education Village and Hummersknott Academy are available, but are no longer always marked due to lack of demand for these grass pitches, with most 7v7 play taking place on 3G AGP that are approved for match play. This serves to demonstrate the impact that AGPs have had on the demand for grass from the younger age groups. There is no remaining capacity at Eastbourne Sports Complex or Longfield Academy however despite match play also taking place on AGP.

8.123 On sites where there is a reliance on grass pitches to accommodate 7v7 play however, spare capacity is evidently much more limited and scheduling pressures continue to exist. Modelling suggests that at both St Aidans School and Blackwell Meadows multiple matches are played consecutively on the 7v7 pitches to accommodate the number of games required. Increasing numbers of teams would therefore place extra pressures in terms of scheduling.

5 v 5 Pitches

8.124 Similar to pitches for 7v7, there is good availability during the week (59 MES) arising as a result of the qualitative improvements that have taken place, which maximises the number of games that can be sustained weekly. With only Mount Pleasant Primary School being unsecured and limited poor quality provision, capacity remains high in all scenarios.

8.125 Whilst there is adequate capacity across the week, like other pitch types this is much more constrained at peak times (10 MES). When excluding the unsecured spare capacity at Mount Pleasant Primary, this reduces to 9.5 MES. There is a small amount of spare capacity at each site that is used, with the exception of Priory Hurworth, where matches are already played consecutively in order to meet the demand that is evident today.

8.126 Notably, as is the case with 7v7 provision, grass 5v5 pitches at sites where there is also a 3G AGP receive much lower levels of usage. The 5v5 pitch at Hummersknott is no longer used, and there is also more limited use of 5v5 grass pitches at Eastbourne Sports Complex than there is at other sites. That said, whilst usage at Darlington RA and Blackwell Meadows is high, with five pitches available at Darlington RA (across the cricket outfield) the majority of spare capacity is provided at this site. There is no use of the 5v5 pitch at South Park, although this continues to be available should demand be identified.

8.127 It is clear therefore that the overall message based on the analysis of the adequacy of current provision is that despite the positive improvements that have taken place in terms of the provision of additional capacity and enhanced quality, the simultaneous growth in football participation means that there remains a need for additional capacity to meet demand.

3G AGP Analysis

8.128 The FA National Facilities Strategy, implemented through the Football Foundation (2025-2030 Strategy), places 3G Artificial Grass Pitches (AGPs) at the centre of grassroots football development. It emphasises the role that 3G AGP can play in addressing poor natural pitch quality and enabling year-round play. The use of 3G AGP for both training and match play is now strongly promoted.

8.129 Building on these principles, consultation as part of this PPS emphasised the importance placed on 3G pitch provision in Darlington, with many clubs preferring to use 3G pitches over grass because of the consistent quality that they provide. The weather in Darlington is perceived to be a particular issue during the winter months, and use of 3G pitches helps to address this. The perceived lack of 3G pitches was identified as the main issue for clubs.

8.130 Demand on 3G pitches can be classified into three areas;

- Matchplay – which requires use of a 3G pitch that is included on the FF 3G Pitch Register following a quality assessment process. All full size 3G pitches in Darlington are currently included on the 3G pitch register. Use of 3G pitches for match play can influence the demand for grass pitches - as usage of 3G AGPs increases, the number of grass pitches needed to meet demand reduces

- Informal / recreational use – Recreational football (including formal leagues and informal pay and play) is a key part of football participation, and one that playing pitch strategies do not currently quantify. Recreational football is seen as a vehicle to boost participation in football – both Powerleague and Leisure Leagues operate on 3G AGP in Darlington

- Training – the optimal surface for football training is 3G AGP and the majority of clubs wish to use these facilities for midweek training.

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Use of the existing 3G AGPs

8.131 The Sport England guidance indicates that the adequacy of AGPs is measured through;

- The amount of play that a site is able to sustain (based upon the number of hours that the pitch is accessible to the community during peak periods up to a maximum of 34 hours per week). Peak periods have been deemed to be Monday to Thursday 17:00 to 21:00; Friday 17:00 to 19:00 and Saturday and Sunday 09:00 to 17:00;
- The amount of play that takes place (measured in hours)
- Whether there is any spare capacity at the site based upon a comparison between the capacity of the site and the actual usage; and
- Any other key issues relating to the site which have arisen through consultation.

8.132 Analysis of the use of the existing 3G AGPs is summarised in Table 8.8. It demonstrates that despite the provision of an additional 3G AGP at Eastbourne Sports Complex since 2021 SFS, there is almost no remaining spare capacity on any of the 3G AGPs either during the week or at weekends. This reflects the findings of the club consultation, where a perceived deficiency of AGPs emerged as the biggest issue for football clubs.

8.133 Crucially, almost all slots on pitches are taken between 6pm and 8pm, which is the most popular time for training. Where there is availability, this is typically between 5pm and 6pm or after 8pm, or on a Friday evening. Clubs highlight a lack of access to desirable time slots as a particular issue and several clubs indicate that they do not have enough training slots for the number of teams that they are running and are seeking additional time slots, but that none are available.

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Table 8.8 – Use of AGPs

Site Name	Key Users	Midweek Usage and Spare Capacity	Weekend Usage and Spare Capacity
Eastbourne Sports Complex (2 Pitches)	Darlington FC and Darlington FC Youth, Darlington College, Darlington Locomotives, Darlington RA, Darlington Town, Darlington Young Bulls Youth, Middleton Rangers	No availability during peak hours	At capacity throughout the weekend for match play. Ad hoc availability only.
Longfield Academy	Darlington 21st Allstars, Darlington FC (Youth), Darlington United Youth, Heighington Boys, Darlington DSRM	No availability during peak hours. One or two part slots available on Friday PM	Booked for training and some match play Sat AM. Available Sat PM. At capacity on Sunday for match play
Hummersknott Academy	Darlington Spraire Lads and Lasses, Darlington TSC, Darlington Mount Pleasant, Darlington FC Walking Football	Almost no availability during peak hours, one third of a pitch available after 8pm in one or two time slots	Booked for training Sat AM, some availability Sat PM. Fully booked Sunday.
Education Village	Darlington RA, Darlington United Youth, Hurworth Albion, Middleton Rangers	Almost no availability during peak hours.	Ad hoc availability but not available for match play as not listed on 3G pitch register

8.134 Table 8.8 therefore demonstrates that the existing stock of AGPs is at capacity, both for training, but also in terms of the number of matches that can be accommodated at peak time.

FA 3G Modelling

8.135 The FA has devised a theoretical model to evaluate the demand for 3G AGPs in a given area. This model evaluates the baseline requirement for 3G pitches taking into account the training requirements of clubs. It requires one 3G pitch per 38 teams. The results of this modelling are then be compared against the analysis of real-life usage of the 3G AGPs in the Borough to determine whether new facilities are actually required.

8.136 Table 8.3 confirmed that there are 220 teams based in Darlington this season (regardless of where teams play matches or currently train). This means that there is an approximate current requirement for 6 AGPs at a Boroughwide level to meet current demand for football.

8.137 With the equivalent of 4 existing full size 3G AGPs that are available to the community (pitch at Rockcliffe Park is not available, pitch 2 at Eastbourne Sports Complex is equivalent to 0.75 due to NLS usage, small sized pitch at Education Village contributes 0.25 equivalent of a pitch) FA data modelling therefore suggests a potential need for at least two more AGPs to meet current demand for football training. This unmet demand is evidenced by the consultation and analysis of current bookings (Table 8.8), which confirmed that there is no spare capacity on existing facilities and a perceived deficiency of provision by clubs.

8.138 This level of unmet demand for AGPs is also reflected in the Local Football Facilities Plan (LFFP 2025). The LFFP identifies a need for one pitch to serve the central area (with Eastbourne Sports Complex and Darlington RA listed as potential locations) as well as one pitch in the potential south area. The plan suggests that consideration should be given to any pitch in the south area should meeting demand for rugby union use (as well as football).

8.139 In addition to this need arising from football, Section 7 captured unmet demand for access to 3G AGP from rugby clubs. Whilst none of the existing 3G AGPs are WR Compliant meaning that they cannot therefore be used for rugby, this is a key priority of both clubs and the RFU moving forwards. With 34 rugby teams in the Borough, use of the FA modelling would suggest that this increases current demand to the equivalent of at least 3 additional 3G AGPs (not taking into account potential growth, which will be considered later in this section).

8.140 Several potential sites have emerged during consultation as potential locations to support additional 3G AGP. These are summarised below, along with comments based on the current position at the site in Table 8.9.

Table 8.9 – Potential 3G AGP Locations

Site	Comment
Arena	• Potentially improve function of site – existing grass pitch within arena is limited in capacity and there are issues with grass growth due to shadows of stand • Multi sport project – football and rugby • Well located to support rugby, there is clear evidence of demand from a rugby perspective at this site • Club likely to have required infrastructure to manage facility • Potentially play a reduced role in meeting demand for football due to need to balance football and rugby usage

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Site	Comment
	• Football partner unclear at this stage - previous aspirations to develop AGP at Arena alongside Darlington FC have concluded • Funding unclear – if funding required, potential challenges of management may arise– football led pitch (required for funding) managed by rugby club (as owners of the site). Alternative funding mechanism may be sale of some land.
Eastbourne Sports Complex	• Council venue – spread of users and clear management solution and structure already in place • Established since 2010 as main multi pitch hub site in Darlington – supports further concentration of activity, but also lack of provision in remainder of town • High demand from existing users at Eastbourne Sports Complex • Clear pressures on capacity of grass pitches that AGP would help to address • Land identified and space available • Deliverable project
Darlington RA	• Established multi club base that requires renovation and would benefit from investment • Likely location of 3G would result in loss of existing adult grass pitch although this would improve capacity (and potentially enable relocation of other teams from the club). Would need to ensure design supported progression of first team into NLS – project potentially dependent on club reaching NLS Step 6 • Site already offers substantial capacity for 7v7 and 5v5 • Ancillary facilities would require significant investment (although this is already a key priority) • Potential displacement of activity from Education Village • Club support, funding model needs to be identified • Potential issues relating to car parking
Hurworth School	• Strong interest expressed by the school • Alternative location in Darlington would improve geographical dispersion of facilities – location however quite remote from main areas of population • Only one community team currently using grass school pitches (which are good) – limited role in reducing existing pressures at the site • Pressures at other site in Hurworth (Priory Hurworth) although this is the club's own ground – interest in usage of any new AGP for match play assumed but unconfirmed • Daytime use secured through location on school site • Possibly site specific challenges – eg power cables
Blackwell Meadows	• Helps to reduce the capacity pressures identified on grass pitches at this site • Evidence of demand at site for both rugby and football – likely to be a combined solution with rugby – balance of usage between rugby and football • Location identified that does not impact on 1st team pitch, would improve functionality of identified space which is playing field, but not currently usable • Likely to be led by Rugby Club as they own the ground. Football partner unclear - Young Bulls, or solution for Darlington FC • Funding unclear – if funding required, potential challenges of management may arise– football led pitch (required for funding) managed by rugby club (as owners of the site)

8.141 The strategy document will evaluate the overall requirements for 3G AGP and make recommendations for the way forward.

Future Demand

8.142 The future requirement for football pitches (grass and AGP) will be impacted by several factors, including;

- Population growth and / or change to the demographic profile of the population
- Changes in participation trends and in how pitch sports are played
- Club specific development plans and aspirations.

8.143 Future demand may also be influenced by changes in the way the game is played, for example the increasing preference for 3G pitches over grass.

8.144 Significant population growth over and above recent levels is projected in Darlington. The potential impact of this growth in population is therefore considered below.

Population Change

8.145 Team Generation Rates (TGRs) indicate how many people in a specified age group are required to generate one team. They can be used to project the theoretical number of teams that would be generated from the population growth in Darlington up to 2036.

8.146 Table 8.10 summarises the current TGRs for football and uses them to evaluate the potential impact of projected population change. It takes into account the projected changes in population profile, as well as the increase in the number of residents and is based upon bespoke population projections prepared by the Council. The figures have been calculated using Sport England's Playing Pitch Calculator (PPC).

Table 8.10 – Impact of Population Growth in Darlington

Sport age groups	% of population in age group	Number of people from new population in age group-	Existing team generation rate	Number of Teams Generated	Home matches during peak period	Training Demand per Week
Men 11v11 (16-45yrs)	17.69%	2,318.73	640	3.62	1.81	3.62
Women 11v11 (16-45yrs)	17.96%	2,354.13	2,094	1.12	0.56	1.12
Boys 11v11 (12-15yrs)	1.93%	253.3	60	4.24	2.12	4.24
Girls 11v11 (12-15yrs)	1.94%	253.87	247	1.03	0.51	1.03
Boys 9v9 (10-11yrs)	0.94%	123.16	48	2.58	1.29	2.58
Girls 9v9 (10-11yrs)	0.87%	113.55	114	0.99	0.5	0.99
Mixed 7v7 (8-9yrs)	2.34%	307.41	61	5.06	2.53	5.06
Mixed 5v5 (6-7yrs)	2.21%	289.19	53	5.43	2.72	5.43

8.147 It indicates that **population growth alone** will have quite an impact on demand. At peak time, there will be demand for circa;

- 2 additional adult matches
- 2 youth 11v11 pitches
- 1.5 9v9 matches
- 2.5 7v7 matches
- 3 5v5 matches.

8.148 Table 8.11 summarises the impact of this on the adequacy of provision.

Table 8.11 – Summary of Adequacy of Provision (Future)

Pitch Type	Scenario	All Community Pitches (MES)	Excluding Spare Capacity at Unsecured Sites	Excluding Spare Capacity at Unsecured and Poor sites
Adult Pitches	Weekly Position	29	25	23.5
Adult Pitches	Peak Time	14	10	8.5
Youth Pitches	Weekly Position	1.5	0.5	-0.5
Youth Pitches	Peak Time	-3.5	-4.5	-5.5
9v9	Weekly Position	16	16	16
9v9	Peak Time	-0.5	-0.5	-0.5
7v7	Weekly Position	50.5	39	37
7v7	Peak Time	5.5	2	1
5v5	Weekly Position	67	64.5	63.5
5v5	Peak Time	7	6.5	6.5

8.149 Table 8.8 above therefore confirms that the increase in participation arising from population will reduce the spare capacity for adult football and 5v5 football and supply will only be just sufficient for 7v7. The existing shortfall of 11v11 youth pitches will be exacerbated, and there will also be insufficient capacity to accommodate all demand for 9v9 football.

8.150 Crucially, the above population growth will also impact on demand for football training. This demand will be equivalent to circa 24 hours of training on a 3G. Table 8.8 reported that the existing stock of facilities does not have capacity to accommodate this additional demand, suggesting that growth will generate demand for a third 3G AGP (just to meet the needs of football).

increasing Participation

8.151 The role of the Football Foundation and Durham FA is to grow demand and the key priorities of Durham FA are to;

- Help with the transition from youth to adult football
- Engage new players from diverse communities
- Provide a recreational offer
- Embed broader playing opportunities at clubs to meet the needs of male, female and disability pathways.

8.152 To help deliver the above aims, the Durham FA looks to;

- Support the improvement of grass pitches
- increase participation amongst women and girls
- ensure that there is equal access for girls at existing and new sites.

8.153 Tables 8.6 and 8.7 confirmed that there is almost no capacity for growth in 11v11 youth and 9v9 football in Darlington, with existing levels of participation already resulting in capacity shortfalls for youth football and projected future increases in population growth resulting in capacity issues for 9v9 too. Equally, there is limited spare capacity for 7v7 football.

8.154 Table 8.3 confirmed that there had been greater than a 20% increase in participation between the previous SFS in 2021 and the number of teams playing in the Borough this season. Participation increases had particularly occurred in youth and 9v9 football, although there was growth in all forms of the game except adult football. The increase was in particular driven by increasing levels of participation amongst women and girls.

8.155 Consultation with clubs demonstrates aspirations for further growth, with increasing the number of girls teams a particular priority.

8.156 Whilst the analysis of the existing demand, as well as the growth in demand that will be generated through population increase provides a clear and solid foundation for forecasting future demand, with growth in football still occurring exponentially, it is important that a scenario where this continues is taken into account.

8.157 Table 8.9 illustrates the impact that an growth in participation would have on the projected position if a similar scale of growth occurred between this strategy and the next (2031) as did between 2021 and 2026. This growth is above the level projected in Table 8.8. It confirms that the supply of 9v9 and youth 11v11 pitches would be even further constrained.

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Table 8.9 – Impact of Growth on Adequacy of Provision

Pitch Type	Baseline Projected Demand	Increase in Participation (10%)	Match Equivalents	Future Position at Peak Time (Secured Community Use)	Future Position at Peak Time (MES) for 10% additional increase	Future Position at Peak Time (MES) for 20% additional increase
11v11	42	4.2	2	14	12	9
Youth 11v11	62	6.2	3	-3.5	-6	-10
9v9	43	4.3	2.5	-0.5	-3.5	-6
7v7	46	4.8	2.5	5.5	3	0.5
5v5	49	4.9	2.5	7	4.5	2

8.158 It is clear therefore that the existing constraints on the pitch stock will be exacerbated in future years and that there is a need to consider how growth can be accommodated. There remains just adequate capacity for adult football, but the amount of unmet demand for 9v9 football and youth football exceed this spare capacity, particularly if high growth is achieved.

Overall Picture

8.159 Overall, analysis has therefore demonstrated that demand has increased significantly since the previous PPS. As a consequence, despite significant investment driven by the previous SFS including qualitative improvements at numerous sites and the provision of an additional AGP, there are pressures on the existing infrastructure and a need to provide additional capacity for both matchplay (particularly 9v9 and youth 11v11 football) and training (3G AGP).

8.160 The following issues are impacting how effectively current demand is met by the existing infrastructure;

- There is a need to provide additional capacity, particularly for youth and 9v9 football. While there is spare capacity across the borough as a whole, this is largely spread out and generally at small / single pitch sites (that are often poor, lacking in ancillary facilities or are associated with other issues, such as poor parking).

- Evidence suggests that there is a need to further increase the number of AGPs in the Borough by 2 (3 if taking into account the demand generated by rugby clubs), which would improve the infrastructure available for both match play and training

- Despite significant improvements at many sites, some pitches continue to suffer from quality issues which impact on capacity – this is particularly critical at St Aidans Academy and Teesside Airport, where large clubs are based. Durham County Football Association are already working with both clubs to support improvement works. There are also several smaller sites (in particular at Council owned parks venues) where pitch quality is poor and this limits both player experience but also the capacity that is offered). The main issues mirror those outlined in 2021 – drainage, compaction and poor pitch surface

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- The pressures on the existing infrastructure mean that there is heavy usage on many sites. There is consequently a reliance on strong maintenance programmes to keep up with this usage.

- Issues with ancillary provision are preventing full use of pitches at some sites – in particular, the lack of car parking at Staindrop Road means that these pitches are not used. There are also several sites where ancillary provision is not adequate, including Blackwell Meadows, Darlington RA, Priory Hurworth House

- Facilities at Darlington RA continue to require upgrade (although capacity has improved since the previous PPS due to the creation of pitches at Staindrop Road) and there are also concerns that the progression of Darlington FC may be impacted by the availability of appropriate facilities in the Borough

- There are opportunities to increase usage at some sites, with Carmel College and Wyvern Academy representing a particular opportunity to improve participation.

- Significant forecast population growth is likely to generate increased demand, which will result in even greater pressures on the existing infrastructure (particularly youth 11v11 and 9v9 pitches) as well as a higher deficit of 3G AGP

- Potential ongoing increases in participation will see these deficiencies increase further.

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Summary and Issues for the Strategy to address

Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• 71 grass pitches offer secured community use, further 10 unsecured • Half of all pitches serve younger age groups – 9v9 / 7v7 / 5v5 • 5 full sized 3G AGP also provided, all of which are on FA 3G AGP register (4 available for community use) • The total number of pitches has reduced slightly since the 2021 SFS • Pitch quality has improved significantly since 2021 and over 50% of pitches assessed as part of the FA PitchPower scheme are good. That said, there remain a small number of pitches (10%) that are poor and several others that are in the lower echelons of a standard quality rating. Where quality issues occur, these are generally associated with drainage, compaction and pitch surface issues as was the case in 2021 • Despite the improvements that have taken place, club dissatisfaction remains high. The main concerns identified are a lack of pitches (particularly 3G) for both match play and training. Clubs highlight particular difficulties in securing access to 3G pitches for training • There are also concerns that poor ancillary facilities are a barrier to participation on some sites – there are sites with no provision and others were facilities are insufficient for the number / variety of teams that are participating	• Quality issues at key sites - this is particularly critical at St Aidans Academy and Teesside Airport, where large clubs are based. Durham FA are already working with both clubs to support improvement works. • Quality issues at other sites (in particular at Council owned parks venues) where pitch quality is poor and this limits both player experience but also the capacity that is offered). The main issues mirror those outlined in 2021 – drainage, compaction and poor pitch surface • Lack of car parking at Staindrop Road means that these pitches are not used. There are also several sites where ancillary provision is not adequate, including Blackwell Meadows, Darlington RA, Priory Hurworth House
Demand	• There are 220 Darlington based teams affiliated this season, which represents significant growth from the position in 2021 • With the exception of adult football, there has been growth in all forms of the game • Clubs highlight a lack of AGPs for matches and training as the key barrier to growth • Modelling suggests that there is demand for 6 3G AGPs based on current participation • Education demand is also an important consideration, given the important role that many of the school sites play in meeting club demand • Darlington FC is the highest performing club in Darlington, with the team currently playing in The National League North (Step 2 of the National League System (NLS)). Whilst the club have now played at Blackwell Meadows for ten years, they continue to explore options to secure their long term future. There is a need to ensure that they	

	have capacity to grow and progress within the NLS (as well as potentially into the football league) and to as ensure that the club's training requirements are met. Darlington Town FC also play in the NLS, and there are several other teams that are playing in feeder leagues to the NLS. Should any of these achieve progression, Pitch2 at Eastbourne Academy could accommodate this activity.	• Opportunities to increase use of Carmel College / Wyvern Academy in particular • Lack of 3G AGP for both training and match play • Question marks over long term location of Darlington FC

Adequacy of Provision	• Quality has improved significantly since the previous strategy, and this has maximised the capacity of the existing pitch stock. There are few poor pitches remaining, although some quality issues continue to impact play (particularly drainage)
	• The increases in quality have however only served to enable the growth in participation to be sustained. A significant rise in the number of teams means that demand is much higher than it has ever been before and consequently, modelling demonstrates that supply is still closely matched with demand, specifically;
	  • There is adequate capacity overall for adult football, with spare capacity across the week and at peak time. It is evident however that some of this spare capacity is on poorer quality sites and that the quality of adult pitches is much lower than the quality of smaller pitches. Spare capacity at peak time remains adequate, but is reduced when poor quality and unsecured sites are eliminated.
	  • There are insufficient youth pitches at peak time to meet demand, which reflects the challenges scheduling matches reported by clubs
	  • The availability of 9v9 pitches is also limited, with supply only just able to meet demand at peak time (0.5 MES spare capacity).
	  • There is greater availability on 7v7 and 5v5 pitches, in part due to increasing use of AGPs for smaller sided games. There are some pitches that are now rarely used (primarily those on sites that also contain AGPs) but clear pressures on other sites where there are no AGPs and large numbers of teams needing to play (for example Priory Hurworth House, St Aidans, Blackwell Meadows).
	  • AGPs are important in Darlington for both training and match play and consultation suggests that AGPs are the preferred surface for the majority of teams (due to the benefits that they offer in terms of consistency in the context of the weather in North East England) There is a deficit of 2 – 3 3G AGPs to meet current demand and this will increase as further participation growth and / or population increases are experienced
	  • Future population growth will generate increased demand for all forms of football, but will increase deficiencies of grass youth 9v9 and youth 11v11 football in particular	

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	• In addition to the challenges of providing enough capacity for match play and training, there are also concerns with regards access to changing facilities on some sites. Appropriate facilities are vital to support the growth of women and girls football, as well as to sustain junior and adult activity, and the provision that is available falls below the levels required at several sites • The future of Darlington FC remains a question, with the club looking for a long term solution for their future	
Key Issues for Strategy to address	• The existing infrastructure for football is only just able to support existing participation and facilities therefore require protection • There is a need to provide additional capacity, particularly for youth and 9v9 football. While there is spare capacity across the borough as a whole, this is largely spread out and generally at small / single pitch sites (that are often poor, lacking in ancillary facilities or are associated with other issues, such as poor parking). • There is demand for additional AGPs, with modelling suggesting three additional pitches are required (at least 3 to meet current demand if taking into account demand generated by rugby union)- additional provision would improve the infrastructure available for both match play and training • There remain quality issues on some grass pitches that will need to be addressed – particularly on large club bases and on adult football pitches • The pressures on the existing infrastructure mean that there is heavy usage on many sites. There is consequently a reliance on strong maintenance programmes to keep up with this usage – this will need to be sustained over the next strategy period • There is a need to improve ancillary provision to ensure that this does not constraint participation • Whilst there are capacity pressures across the borough, there are opportunities to alleviate scheduling issues through the use of sites that are not currently used - Carmel College and Wyvern Academy both provide several pitches and use of these by clubs would help reduce the existing constraints on capacity • Significant forecast population growth is likely to generate increased demand, which will result in even greater pressures on the existing infrastructure (particularly youth 11v11 and 9v9 pitches) as well as a higher deficit of 3G AGP. Additional pitches are likely to be required to address this growth • Potential ongoing increases in participation will see these deficiencies increase further.	

9.0 Athletics

Introduction

8.161 This section evaluates the key issues for athletics across Darlington. It sets out the supply and demand for facilities and assesses the adequacy of provision both at the current time and in future years.

Gathering Supply Information

Quantity

8.162 Eastbourne Sports Complex, owned and managed by Darlington Borough Council, is the major athletics venue in Darlington and the strategic outdoor sports hub for the town.

8.163 Alongside football and bowls, Eastbourne Sports Complex offers an eight-lane, synthetic athletics track, with a full-range of facilities for track and field events (javelin runways / long jump and triple jump runways and sandpits, pole vault, shot putt, throws cage) and a steeple chase water jump. The track is fully floodlit.

8.164 The track opened in 1999 and at the time of opening, was a county standard facility. At the time of the previous strategy in 2021, the surface quality had deteriorated, with many cracks and evidence of wear in the surface and was in poor condition. As a result, it was no longer used for competition or events.

8.165 An options appraisal was undertaken following completion of the SFS and as a result, the athletics track at Eastbourne was refurbished in 2023 and a further 3G pitch was also provided.

8.166 This central athletics venue is supported by a 400m cinder track at Longfield Academy. This track is owned and managed by Longfield Academy.

Quality

8.167 Track Mark is England Athletics' quality assurance scheme – it assesses track quality against the facility and equipment standards required by UK Athletics. From 2021, venues that are not engaging with the TrackMark accreditation will not be eligible to apply for competition licence at any level. There are six components to this assessment, specifically;

- Unit 1 Track
- Unit 2 Field
- Unit 3 Ancillary
- Unit 4 Operations
- Unit 5 Floodlighting
- Unit 6 Competition.

8.168 The UK Athletics website confirms that the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex has been assessed and has passed Units 1, 2,3, 4 and 5. Unit 6 (competition) has not been completed, as at this point in time the track does not host competition.

8.169 This confirms that following the recent refurbishment, the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex is now high quality. As part of the refurbishment, many of the issues identified in the 2021 strategy were addressed. In particular improvements to the security of the facility (addressed through the relocation of reception and installation of fencing) have generated significant improvement.

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8.170 Consultation indicated that there is a perception that some quality issues still remain, specifically;

- While the track itself was refurbished, there was no investment into the associated facilities. As a consequence, the high jump mat requires urgent replacement
- Some wear and tear on the throwing cage also exists and requires improvement
- The existing storage containers for club equipment are deemed to be poorly located.

8.171 The lack of spectator seating is also highlighted as a quality issue by the clubs that use the facility.

8.172 The TrackMark programme does not extend to cinder / gravel tracks and consequently the track at Longfield Academy is not eligible for this accreditation. Site visits demonstrate that this track is in poor condition having not received any investment for over 20 years.

Accessibility

8.173 Map 9.1 (provided by England Athletics) illustrates the catchment area of the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex. It shows that it is well located to serve the population of Darlington Borough. In total, 266,931 people live within the target 20 minute drivetime of the site.

8.174 Some residents in the north of the borough are within the 20 minute catchment of the track at Shildon (County Durham).

8.175 Map 9.2, also provided by England Athletics, illustrates the 30 minute catchment area for Eastbourne Sports Complex. It confirms that all residents of Darlington Borough fall within this catchment, and also demonstrates that the track is well located to also meet needs further afield. For 90% of people that fall within the catchment of Eastbourne Sports Complex, this facility is their nearest athletics track.

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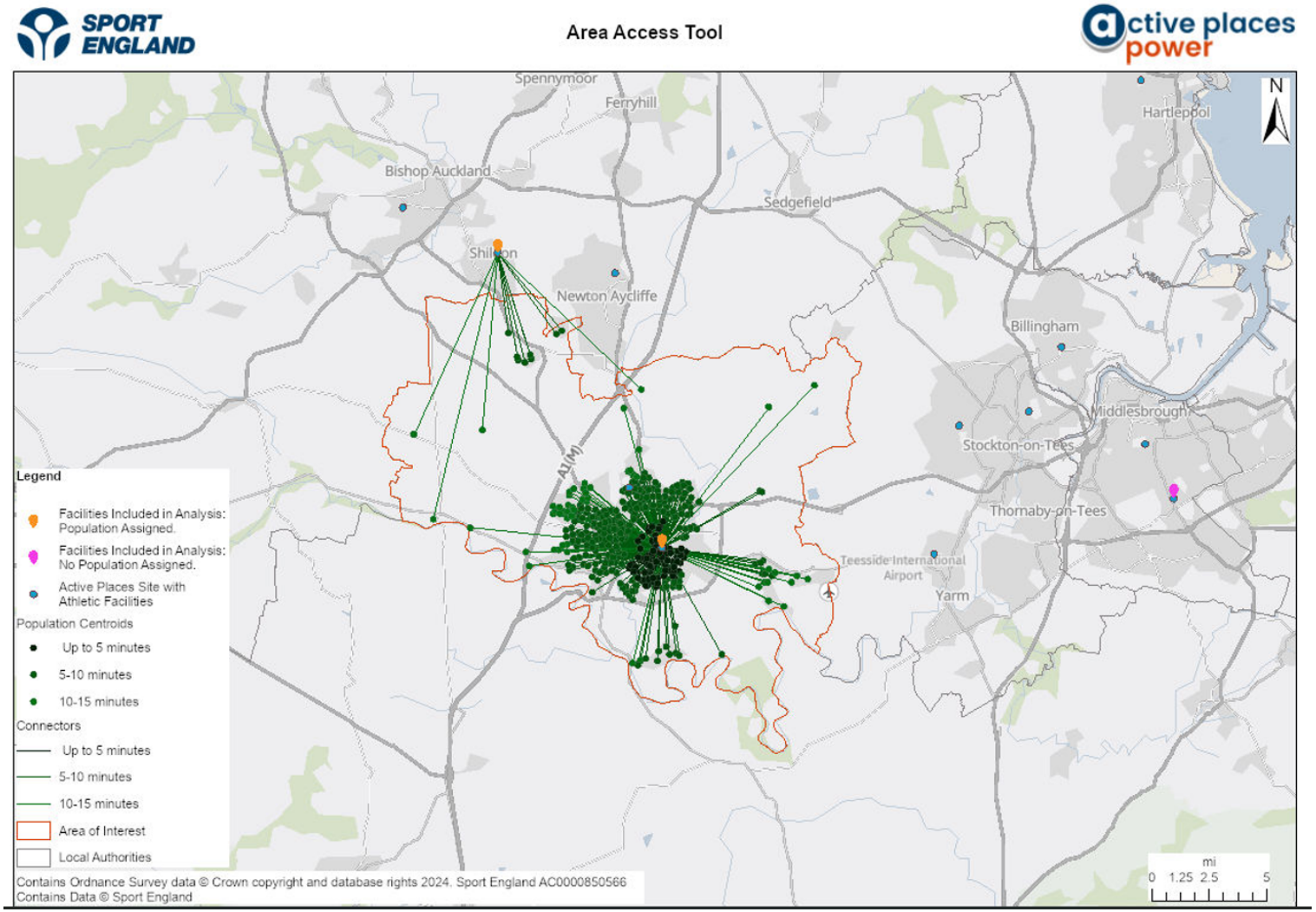
Map 9.1 – Catchment of Eastbourne Sports Complex



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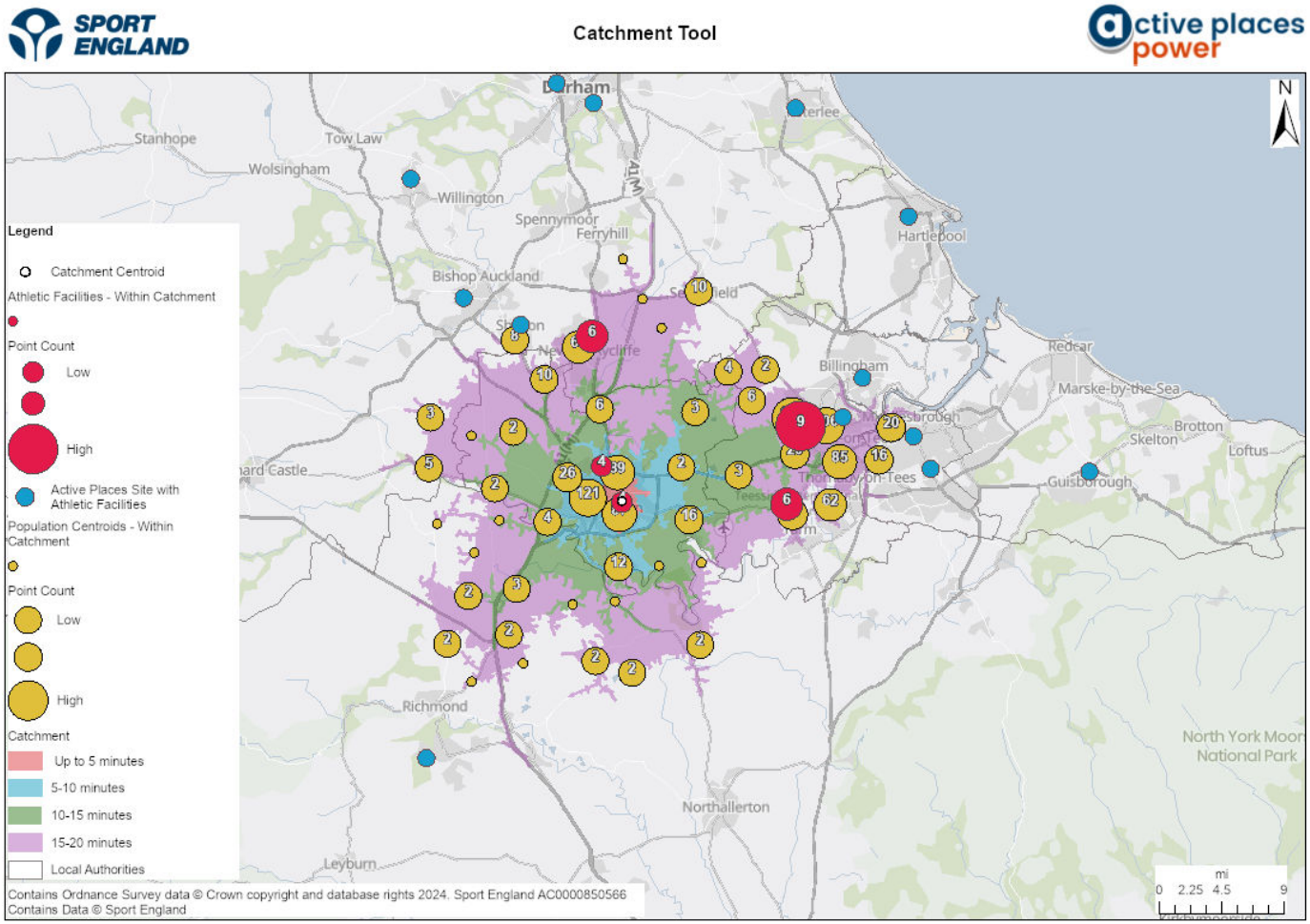
Map 9.2 – 30 minute drivetime of Eastbourne Sports Complex



Availability

8.176 Eastbourne Sports Complex is managed by Darlington Borough Council and is accessed by a variety of clubs. It is open from 8am – 9pm midweek, and from 8am – 3pm at weekends. Long term and short term bookings, as well as pay and play access are also available and the Council's website clearly confirms how the facility can be booked.

8.177 The track is block booked by Darlington Harriers and Athletics Club on Tuesdays and Thursdays (5pm onwards).

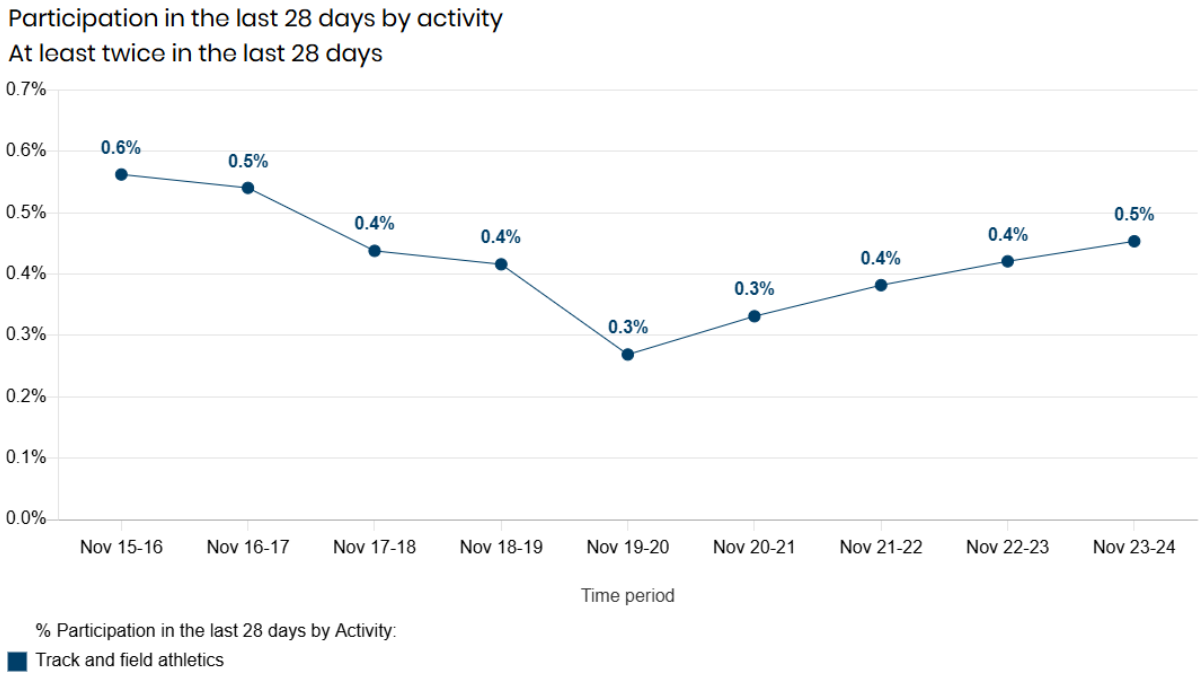
8.178 Although there is a strong community use programme for both indoor and outdoor sports facilities at Longfield Academy, there is no community use of the athletics track. Consultation with the school confirms that there have not been any requests for access to the track, in part likely due to the poor condition of the facility.

Demand

Participation Trends

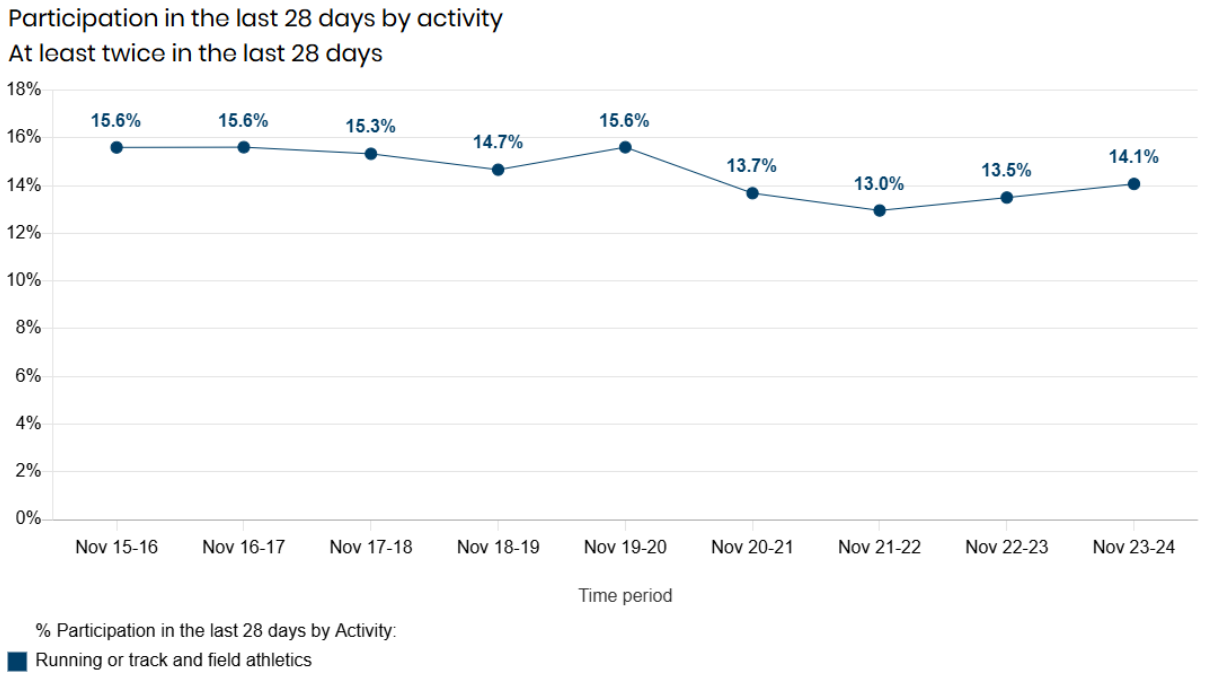
8.179 The Active Lives England wide data for adult participation in track and field at least once every 28 days demonstrates that since the covid pandemic (2020), when participation in track and field athletics reached an all time low, participation has increased again and is now approaching the highest levels recorded. This is illustrated in Chart 9.1

Chart 9.1 - Active Lives track and field athletics participation England wide 2015 – 16 to 2023 – 24



8.180 When considering those that indicated that they participate in "running or track and field athletics", participation rates become significantly higher, showing that participation in athletics extends much wider than the track. This is illustrated in Chart 9.2.

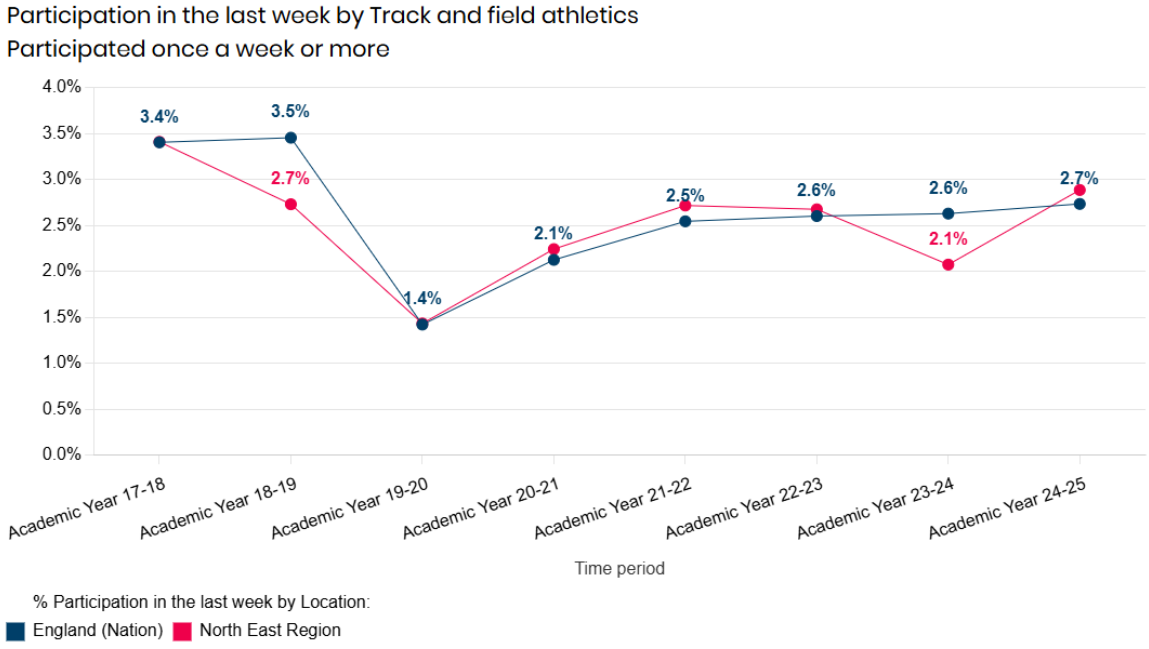
Chart 9.2 - Active Lives Running and track and field athletics participation England wide 2015 – 16 to 2023 – 2024



8.182 Chart 9.2 shows that participation is starting to increase again following a period of decline.

8.183 Chart 9.3 summarises the results of the Active Lives Survey for Young People in participation in track and field athletics. It demonstrates that like adults, the proportion of younger people enjoying track and field is now starting to increase again (although a decline has been experienced this year in the north east).

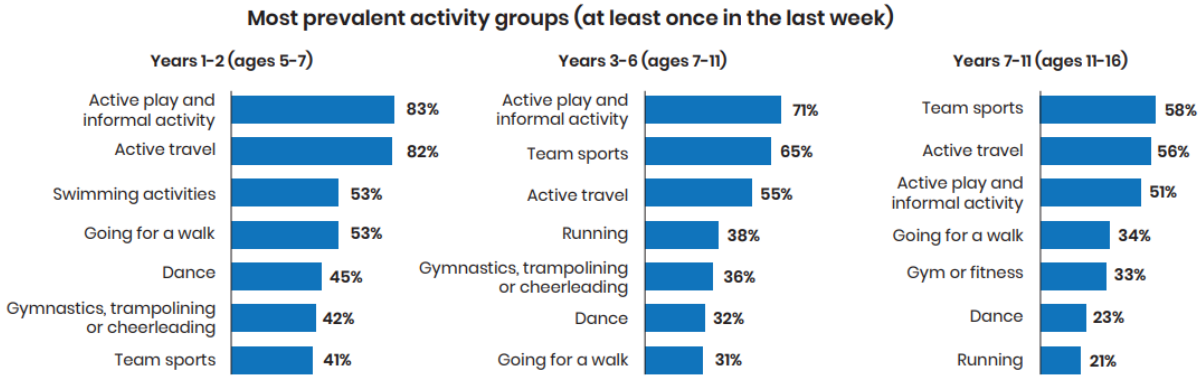
Chart 9.3 - Active Lives activity levels for track and field for young people aged 5 – 16



8.184 Again, when adding running / multi sports etc into these figures participation is much higher.

8.185 What is clear, is that running, athletics and multi sports is one of the most frequently engaged with types of activities amongst young people aged 5 and above as illustrated in Figure 9.4 (extracted from Active Lives, Children and Young People Survey 2024 – 2025 report, Sport England). Effective provision of opportunities to participate will therefore play a key role in promoting ongoing physical activity.

Figure 9.4 – Importance of Athletics, Running and Multi Sports in engaging Children and Young People in Physical Activity



National Governing Body (NGB) Priorities

8.186 England Athletics (EA) is the not-for-profit membership and development body responsible for grassroots athletics and running in England. The remit of England Athletics extends wider than track and field - EA supports 1,750 affiliated clubs and organisations (covering track and field, road running, fell, hill, trail and cross-country clubs), 147,000 registered athletes, 18,700 licensed coaches and leaders, 3,800 officials and 6.2m regular running participants.

8.187 EA's Athletics purpose is to inspire more athletes and runners of all abilities and backgrounds to fulfil their potential and to have a lifelong love for the sport. Their vision is for athletics and running to become an inclusive sport where everyone belongs and can flourish.

8.188 England Athletics strategic position is that in most areas of the country there are sufficient traditional synthetic outdoor 400m tracks to meet club and competition needs and that the focus should be on protecting and maintaining this provision. The protection of the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex is therefore identified as a key priority.

8.189 To inspire recreational running, in addition to traditional facilities, EA is keen to support the development of a new generation of innovative athletics & running facilities (NewGen), as well as a country-wide network of indoor athletics tracks developed as part of future indoor multisport projects.

8.190 England Athletics highlight the opportunities that could be evident at Longfield Academy to revitalise the existing poor quality track. Initial discussions with representatives of the school demonstrated a keen interest in exploring installation of a compact athletics track. England Athletics provide guidance in relation to the provision of such facilities Sport England Athletic Design Guidance Note

8.191 There are several pilot projects underway designed to increase participation in athletics in the North East. The England Athletics Funetics Multi-Challenge is designed for under 10s and Under 12s, the program focuses on introductory running, jumping, and throwing events rather than official licensed competitions. School club links was identified as a key barrier to participation in Darlington, and this initiative is designed to help improve these.

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8.192 The importance of building opportunities to participate in recreational running as part of new development (through the creation of lit routes, running trails etc) is also emphasised. England Athletics now have several examples of sites where opportunities for informal participation have been successfully integrated into the development.

Local Demand

8.193 There are several athletics clubs based in Darlington. The following clubs use the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex;

- Darlington Harriers, which is one of the largest clubs in the North East of England. The club has maintained a similar membership to that evident in 2021, with around 330 existing members. The club is now seeing strong development and growth, particularly amongst the junior section where there is a waiting list (restricted by lack of coaches). The proportion of members joining for social athletics is also increasing. Darlington Harriers are the primary users of the Eastbourne Sports Complex, renting the facility for six hours per week (Tuesday / Thursday).

- Darlington Triathlon Club, who participate in coached swimming and cycling sessions, as well as road running. The club use the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex for a coached session weekly. The club currently have 50 – 60 senior members and cater for all abilities. Previous efforts to extend the club and offer a junior section have been unsuccessful, with a lack of interest / engagement and uptake from local residents. The number of members in the senior section has also seen recent decline.

- Quakers Running Club, who are based at Abbey Road Sports Field focus on road and field running and also hold one fortnightly track session at Eastbourne Sports Complex and have recently hosted the Quaker Mile time trial. Quakers Running Club caters for adults of all running experience, from beginner up to those regularly entering and performing at competition. The club does not have a junior section due to the intensity of coaches required to run this and the additional safeguarding requirements that are generated. The club is always seeking new members however and has recently experienced an increase in participation

- Darlo runners, which is a running group that meets on a Wednesday and Thursday evening for training and social runs. The group primarily runs on the streets of Darlington but hires the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex on a monthly basis

- Allerton Junior Athletics Club are based outside the Borough in North Allerton (North Yorkshire Council), but travel weekly to Darlington to use the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex. The Club caters exclusively for juniors of all running abilities. Membership of the club is growing and has increased by 20% just in the last year. This has been stimulated by the club's work with local schools. The club compete across a variety of athletics disciplines including track and field, road racing and cross country. Members compete at a variety of levels from recreational to county and national.

8.194 Darlington Social Run Group are a weekly 5k free of charge running group that also participate in athletics, but do not typically use the track at Eastbourne.

8.195 A senior and junior parkrun also takes place at South Park. Again, this introduces grass roots participants to athletics.

8.196 The key messages arising from consultation with clubs were;

- Challenges recruiting volunteers / coaches often restricts the activity that can be provided,

- There is limited engagement with athletics by schools in Darlington, which means that attracting new members to the clubs is more challenging. Many schools do not enter the competitions that are held;

- Even the timing of the Darlington Town Sports does not align with the pathways for selection at a representative level (Durham / English Schools etc) – this means that for young people that may be talented, but are not club members, their talent is less likely to be identified and progressed;

- The lack of athletics competition events that take place in Darlington means that there is limited opportunity to inspire, and a lower awareness than there may otherwise be;

- Several clubs believe that the cost of track hire is one of the key barriers to growth, with club funds currently subsidising the cost of the hire for it's members. Some clubs operate on a pay as you go basis in an attempt to reduce the costs to members.

8.197 Specific issues were also raised in relation to the facility provided at Eastbourne, and other facilities used in the Borough, in particular;

- All clubs consider that the quality of the track at Eastbourne Sports Complex is now good, the high quality facility is clearly valued by all that use it
- There are aspirations for further improvement including;
  - Addressing the existing quality issues – high jump pit / throws cage / storage container location
  - Provision of seating / stand
  - Clubhouse / social space.

- Darlington Harriers are keen to re-establish Eastbourne Sports Complex as a strategic track within the North East and to bring competition back to the venue. They believe that proactive partnership working with the Council will be the key to delivering this. Long term however, they note that spectator seating will be required if the track is to regularly host competitions. Although the Council seek to prioritise athletics during the track season (and have removed the football pitch that was historically in the middle of the track in order to do this), the club report that there have been conflicts with the requirements of football on the site, as Football Foundation funding requirements mean that football events cannot be moved during the football season in order to host athletics. The club indicate that this, alongside the lack of spectator seating are the reasons why the club continues to host their events at Shildon Athletics track.

8.198 The importance of ensuring that effective routes are available for those clubs that focus on road running was also raised – in particular, clubs require street lighting to enable them to meet and train safely.

Adequacy of Provision

8.199 The adequacy of facilities for athletics is evaluated by drawing together the data collated and determining the key issues impacting current and projected future participation. There are no formal demand models for athletics.

8.200 Drawing together the supply and demand analysis, it can be seen that;

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- Residents of Darlington are well served in terms of the facilities available, with all residents within the 20 minute drivetime catchment of the strategic venue at Eastbourne Sports Complex. Access is therefore strong
- Having recently been refurbished, this track is of high quality. There are however some key immediate priorities to ensure ongoing functionality of the equipment (high jump mat, throws cage)
- Although the site has achieved TrackMark Accreditation, there are no competitions currently held at the site despite the high quality of facilities that are provided. There are aspirations to bring competition back to the town – long term, this may require the provision of spectator seating
- Whilst the athletics track is well used, accommodating track sessions for several clubs, there is scope for further usage.
- Access to the track is good although clubs raise concerns in relation to the pricing of this facility, identifying this as a barrier to participation. Although Darlington BC have undertaken a benchmarking exercise in order to ensure that the costs associated with track hire are in line with other similar facilities, it will be important to ensure that this is regularly reviewed to maximise accessibility to the facility
- The synthetic surface at Eastbourne Sports Complex is supported by a cinder athletics track at Longfield Academy. This is poor quality and currently has limited role to play in community activity. Located on the other side of town from Eastbourne Sports Complex, there is potential to increase the role that this facility plays in meeting demand for athletics, particularly social / recreational athletics. England Athletics note that there may be an opportunity to explore wider community use of this facility to support recreational running and representatives of the school have indicated interest in exploring the installation of a compact athletics track
- Opportunities to create informal opportunities for athletics as part of the creation of Active Environments for new development also highlighted.

8.201 It is clear therefore that there is no evidence of requirements for any further 400m synthetic tracks, with the facility at Eastbourne Sports Complex serving all residents in the Borough. Instead the priorities and actions for athletics will need to focus on retaining the existing facility and maximising the impact that it can have in the delivery of athletics. There are however opportunities to consider the installation of a compact athletics track, as well as to further enhance the resources to facilitate and promote recreational running within the Borough.

Summary and Key Issues

8.202 The key issues for athletics that need to be considered as part of the strategy development are therefore summarised overleaf in Table 9.1.

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Athletics– Summary and key Issues	Key Facility Issues
Supply • There is one 8 lane synthetic track located at Eastbourne Sports Complex. This facility includes full facilities for field events and is fully floodlit. It is managed by Darlington Borough Council • This track is high quality as it was fully refurbished in 2023 although there are some wear and tear issues that need to be addressed, primarily relating to the equipment (high jump mat, throwing cage, storage container). • Eastbourne Sports Complex is currently accredited to host Level 1 competitions. No competitions have however taken place since the site was refurbished and the track mark accreditation for competitions has not been • There is also a 400m cinder track located at Longfield Academy. This is poor quality and used for curricular activity only	• **Some improvements required at Eastbourne Sports Complex – equipment / storage** • **Opportunities to host competitions at Eastbourne Sports Complex, particularly if spectator seating is provided** • **Poor quality cinder track at Longfield Academy**
Demand • Active Lives Surveys report increasing participation since the covid pandemic. The proportion of young people participating in athletics is also increasing • Darlington Harriers is the largest athletics club in the Borough and one of the largest athletics clubs in the north east. The club are experiencing strong demand at a junior level and social running is also increasing. As the main users of the track, the club currently rent the facility for six hours per week • Darlington Triathlon Club, Darlington Quakers, Darlo Harriers and Allerton Junior Athletics Club also rent the athletics track at Eastbourne Sports Complex. The facility is also open to casual users as well as organised groups • Outside of school use, there is no known community demand for the existing poor quality cinder track at Longfield Academy • In addition, it is evident that there is strong participation in cross country and road running in Darlington, with both Darlington Harriers and Quakers Running Club participating in these activities, and pop up clubs that are unaffiliated to England Athletics but still engaging with running and athletics also evident • All clubs raise cost of access to facilities, alongside volunteers and coaches as the key barriers to increasing demand	

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Adequacy of Existing Provision Analysis demonstrates that; • Residents of Darlington are well served in terms of the facilities available, with all residents within the 20minute drivetime catchment of the strategic venue at Eastbourne Sports Complex. Access is therefore strong • Having recently been refurbished, this track is of high quality. There are however some key immediate priorities to ensure ongoing functionality of the equipment (high jump mat, throws cage) • Whilst the athletics track is well used, accommodating track sessions for several clubs, there is scope for further usage. Although the site has achieved TrackMark Accreditation, there are no competitions currently held at the site despite the high quality of facilities that are provided. There are aspirations to further enhance the facility through the delivery of seating which would help to bring back competition to the town • Access to the track is good although clubs raise concerns in relation to the pricing of this facility, identifying this as a barrier to participation. Although Darlington BC have undertaken a benchmarking exercise in order to ensure that the costs associated with track hire are in line with other similar facilities, it will be important to ensure that this is regularly reviewed to maximise accessibility to the facility • The synthetic surface at Eastbourne Sports Complex is supported by a cinder athletics track at Longfield Academy. This is poor quality and currently has limited role to play in community activity. Located on the other side of town from Eastbourne Sports Complex, there is potential to increase the role that this facility plays in meeting demand for athletics, particularly social / recreational athletics. England Athletics note that there may be an opportunity to explore wider community use of this facility to support recreational running • Opportunities to create informal opportunities for athletics as part of the creation of Active Environments for new development also highlighted.	
Key Issues for the Strategy to Address The above therefore suggests that the strategy will need to; • **Protect the existing athletics track** • **Ensure that accreditation at Eastbourne Sports Complex is maintained (and potentially improved to secure Level 2 status)** • **Seek to provide spectator facilities at Eastbourne Sports Complex if competition returns to the track**	

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- **Create a positive partnership between DBC and the Clubs to maximise the potential of facilities at Eastbourne Sports Complex and promote participation in athletics**
- **Consider the future of the cinder track at Longfield Academy and the opportunities for this site to play a greater role in meeting recreational athletics demand**
- **Explore opportunities to create active environments for athletics as part of new development.**

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Demand • Active Lives Surveys report increasing participation since the covid pandemic. The proportion of young people participating in athletics is also increasing • Darlington Harriers is the largest athletics club in the Borough and one of the largest athletics clubs in the north east. The club are experiencing strong demand at a junior level and social running is also increasing. As the main users of the track, the club currently rent the facility for six hours per week • Darlington Triathlon Club, Darlington Quakers, Darlo Harriers and Allerton Junior Athletics Club also rent the athletics track at Eastbourne Sports Complex. The facility is also open to casual users as well as organised groups • Outside of school use, there is no known community demand for the existing poor quality cinder track at Longfield Academy • In addition, it is evident that there is strong participation in cross country and road running in Darlington, with both Darlington Harriers and Quakers Running Club participating in these activities, and pop up clubs that are unaffiliated to England Athletics but still engaging with running and athletics also evident • All clubs raise cost of access to facilities, alongside volunteers and coaches as the key barriers to increasing demand	

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Adequacy of Existing Provision Analysis demonstrates that; • Residents of Darlington are well served in terms of the facilities available, with all residents within the 20minute drivetime catchment of the strategic venue at Eastbourne Sports Complex. Access is therefore strong • Having recently been refurbished, this track is of high quality. There are however some key immediate priorities to ensure ongoing functionality of the equipment (high jump mat, throws cage) • Whilst the athletics track is well used, accommodating track sessions for several clubs, there is scope for further usage. Although the site has achieved TrackMark Accreditation, there are no competitions currently held at the site despite the high quality of facilities that are provided. There are aspirations to further enhance the facility through the delivery of seating which would help to bring back competition to the town • Access to the track is good although clubs raise concerns in relation to the pricing of this facility, identifying this as a barrier to participation. Although Darlington BC have undertaken a benchmarking exercise in order to ensure that the costs associated with track hire are in line with other similar facilities, it will be important to ensure that this is regularly reviewed to maximise accessibility to the facility • The synthetic surface at Eastbourne Sports Complex is supported by a cinder athletics track at Longfield Academy. This is poor quality and currently has limited role to play in community activity. Located on the other side of town from Eastbourne Sports Complex, there is potential to increase the role that this facility plays in meeting demand for athletics, particularly social / recreational athletics. England Athletics note that there may be an opportunity to explore wider community use of this facility to support recreational running • Opportunities to create informal opportunities for athletics as part of the creation of Active Environments for new development also highlighted.	
Key Issues for the Strategy to Address The above therefore suggests that the strategy will need to; • **Protect the existing athletics track** • **Ensure that accreditation at Eastbourne Sports Complex is maintained (and potentially improved to secure Level 2 status)** • **Seek to provide spectator facilities at Eastbourne Sports Complex if competition returns to the track**	

- **Create a positive partnership between DBC and the Clubs to maximise the potential of facilities at Eastbourne Sports Complex and promote participation in athletics**
- **Consider the future of the cinder track at Longfield Academy and the opportunities for this site to play a greater role in meeting recreational athletics demand**
- **Explore opportunities to create active environments for athletics as part of new development.**

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10.0 Indoor Facilities

Introduction

8.203 This section evaluates the key issues for sports halls and swimming pools across Darlington. It sets out the supply and demand for facilities and assesses the adequacy of provision both at the current time and in future years.

8.204 The assessment follows the guidance of the current National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF), which is subject to review. The current NPPF suggests a robust assessment is required, which compares supply with demand to identify need. The accepted approach for undertaking this is the Assessing Needs and Opportunities Guide (ANOG), which requires;

- Stage A: Prepare and tailor the approach
- Stage B: Gather information on supply and demand
- Stage C: Assessment – bringing the information together
- Application: Application of an assessment.

The application of the assessment is set out in the accompanying Strategy and Action Plan Report.

8.205 This section therefore sets out the findings of Stages A and B and considers the *supply and demand* of sports halls and swimming pools and brings the information together, using the appropriate planning tools, in-line with ANOG and the NPPF

8.206 There is a full and separate strategic assessment report for provision of sports halls and swimming pools across the Darlington Council area. The findings are based on Sport England's Facilities Planning Model (fpm) data from Sport England's 2026 national assessment reports. They were commissioned by Darlington Council to provide an in-depth assessment, applying the extensive data which is available for swimming pools and sports halls. The fpm provides an evidence base which is planning policy compliant and therefore meets the needs of the Local Plan.

8.207 The fpm report is based on seven headings. *total supply; total demand; supply and demand balance; satisfied/met demand; unmet demand; used capacity (how full the swimming pools are); and equity share*.

8.208 A summary of the findings from that report are set out in this section, following the Assessment of Needs and Opportunities headings. It is produced to provide consistency with the assessment for the other facility types in the study scope.

8.209 The findings have been supplemented by site visits and consultations, which have helped to shape the key issues and options and subsequent Strategy and Action Plan recommendations.

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Sports Halls

Supply

Quantity and Quality

8.210 Darlington has 16 sports halls across ten sites that are available for community use. The total sports hall space in Darlington is the equivalent of 56.3 badminton courts. The space available for community use in the weekly peak period is the equivalent of 42.9 courts. The resident population generates demand for 7,657 visits in the weekly peak period, which equates to 26.0 courts with a comfort factor included. This is 16.9 courts fewer than Darlington's available supply, supply therefore exceeds demand.

8.211 Darlington has 4.9 courts per 10,000 population. This is higher than the regional average of 4.7 courts per 10,000 population and the national average of 4.0 courts, so the supply is good and the borough is well provided for.

8.212 The Dolphin Centre is the only public leisure centre in Darlington operated by Darlington Council. The educational sector provides nine of the ten sites, accounting for over 80% of the available capacity in the weekly peak period. The Dolphin Centre is the only public leisure centre and provides 21% of the available capacity in the weekly peak period. Polam Hall School, which did not have a sports hall at the time of the last strategy, have planning permission for a new 3-court hall, which will add further to the educational supply.

8.213 Given that nearly all the sports hall stock is provided by the educational sector, this does restrict residents who require access during weekday daytimes and places greater reliance and pressure on The Dolphin Centre to provide for these residents. Furthermore it also creates challenges in terms of access and continuity of use, particularly during exam time and can restrict specialist sports use, both in terms of access and the sports halls not being fully *fit for purpose* in terms of technical specifications. This was a key issue raised through consultation with clubs and National Governing Bodies (NGBs).

8.214 Details of the sports hall sites are set out in Table 10.1 below.

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Table 10.1 – Darlington Sports Halls 2026

Site	Provider	Facility Type	Dimensions (m)	Area (sqm)	Year Built	Year Refurb	Peak Hours	Total Hours	Site Capacity (visits per week in peak period)
The Dolphin Centre	Public	8-court	40 x 34.5	1380	1982	2006	46	104.3	2,944
Carmel College	Educational	4-court	33 x 18	594	1960		32	34	1,549
		Activity	18 x 10	180			28	28	
Darlington College	Educational	4-court	33 x 18	594	2006		34	46	1,088
Darlington Education Village	Educational	4-court	33 x 18	594	2006		31.5	33.5	3,016
		Activity	17 x 9	153			31.5	33.5	
		Activity	17 x 9	153			31.5	33.5	
		Activity	17 x 9	153			31.5	33.5	
		Activity	17 x 9	153			31.5	33.5	
Hummersknott Academy	Educational	4-court	33 x 18	594	1965	2008	38.5	47	1,232
Longfield Academy	Educational	4-court	34.5 x 20	690	2013		38.5	42.5	1,846
		Activity	17 x 9	153			38.5	42.5	
Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College	Educational	4-court	33 x 18	594	2004		20	20	640
St Aidan's Church of England Academy	Educational	4-court	33 x 18	594	2009		34	47.2	1,088
Wyvern Academy	Educational	4-court	33 x 18	594	2013		29	29	928

8.215 Hurworth School does not appear in the fpm database. It has a 4-court hall with dimensions of 33m x 18m. It opened in 2013 and is available for community use in the weekly peak period. The Hurworth supply has been added to the commentary set-out and headline figures presented.

8.216 Alongside access, scale is also a challenge. The largest individual sports hall in Darlington is the eight-court main hall at the Dolphin Centre. This size of sports hall at the Dolphin can accommodate multiple sports activities at the same time, dimensions to meet higher level play, while also providing a show court for events with spectator seating.

8.217 In 2013, Sport England and the National Governing Bodies for hall sports reviewed and set the size of a main 4 badminton court size sports hall at 34.5m x 20m. A 4-badminton court main hall with these dimensions can provide for all the indoor hall sports at the community level of participation. Halls below these dimensions do have the correct dimensions for the playing area but have limited space between the courts and run off space at the back of the courts.

8.218 The remaining main halls are all four-court halls, of which only Longfield Academy, has dimensions of 34.5m x 20m. These dimensions can cater for all hall sports at the community level of participation and also meet the requirements for club development. The remaining have dimensions of 33m x 18m, the smaller 4-court dimensions. This size of sports hall, while meeting the requirements for most hall sports at the community level of participation, has less space between and behind individual courts for clubs seeking higher levels of play. This does prohibit the use of these sports halls for competition play and specialist sports use, a recurring theme in the consultation from clubs and NGBs.

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8.219 The average age of the sports hall sites in 2025 is 30 years. The Dolphin Centre opened in 1982 and the hall was refurbished in 2006. The oldest sport hall site is Carmel College, which opened in 1960 and is unmodernised. Of the three sites built before 2000, two have been modernised: Hummersknott Academy, which opened in 1965 and was refurbished in 2008, and The Dolphin Centre. None of the four sites opened between 2004 and 2009 has been refurbished. Longfield Academy and Wyvern Academy, both of which opened in 2013, are the newest sports halls.

8.220 The average age of the sports hall sites in 2025 is therefore 30 years. Two of the three sites opened before 2000 have been refurbished, but none of the four sites opened between 2004 and 2009 has been modernised. There is an increasing need for refurbishment of the sports halls.

8.221 There is therefore an increasing need for refurbishment of the sports halls as the stock ages. The oldest sport hall site is Carmel College, which opened in 1960 and is unmodernised, as was the case in the previous strategy. Ensuring any upgrades and investment meet required sports and club technical requirements will be important.

8.222 The assessment illustrates that whilst the supply of sports halls in terms of quantity is good, given the predominance of education providers, there are challenges in terms of access*, fitness for purpose,* in respect of critical dimensions and technical requirements and the ageing nature of the stock.

Accessibility

8.223 In terms of location all the sports hall sites are located in a band from east to west in the centre of the Borough (see Map 10.1 overleaf). There are eight sports hall sites in Stockton-on-Tees towards Darlington's eastern boundary, but none close to the border with Darlington. There are four sites in County Durham located close to the border with Darlington, including Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre. This is a public leisure centre with an eight-court hall. It opened in 1974 and was modernised in 2007. The centre will be accessible to residents in the north of Darlington. There are no sports halls in North Yorkshire close to the border with Darlington.

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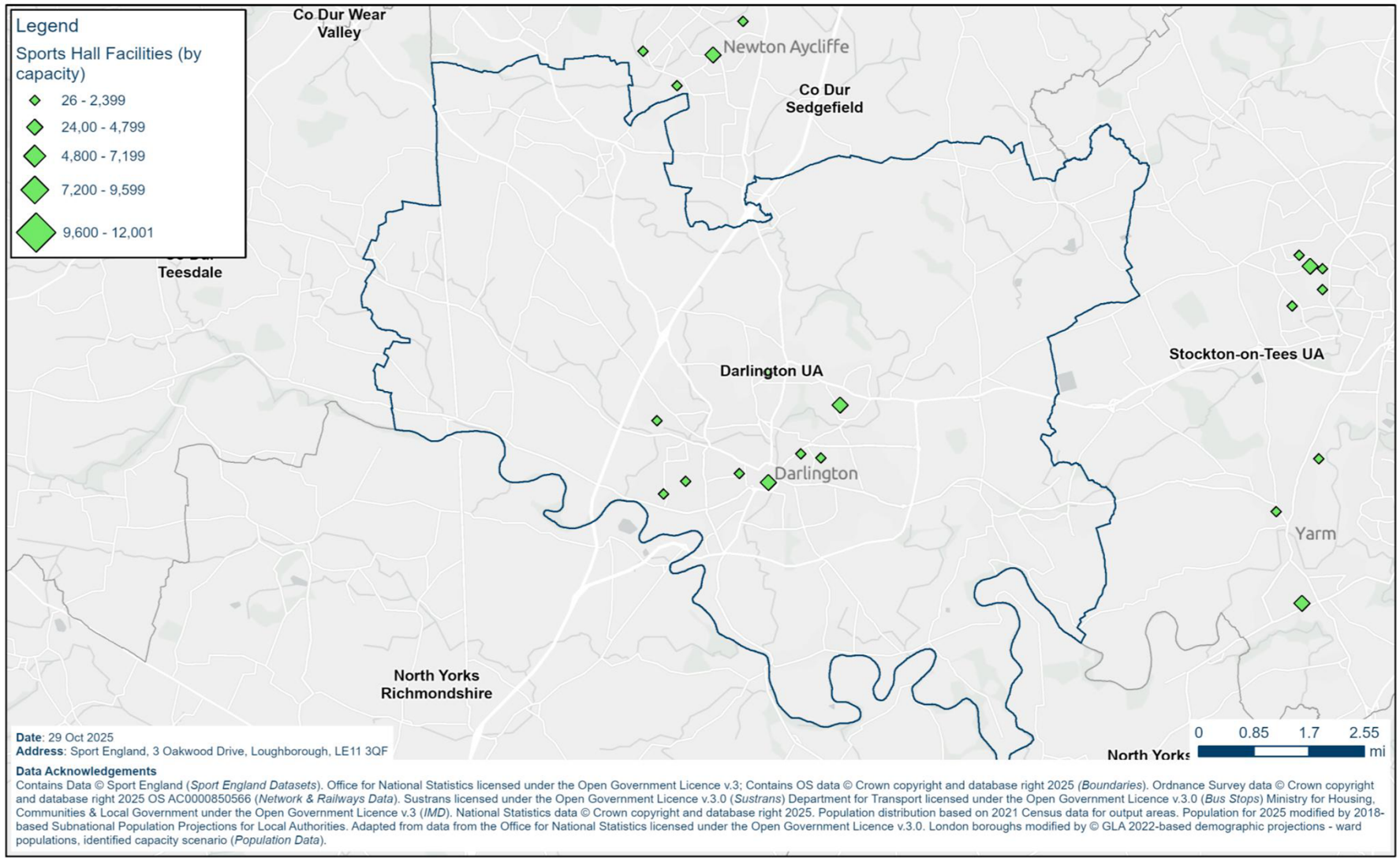
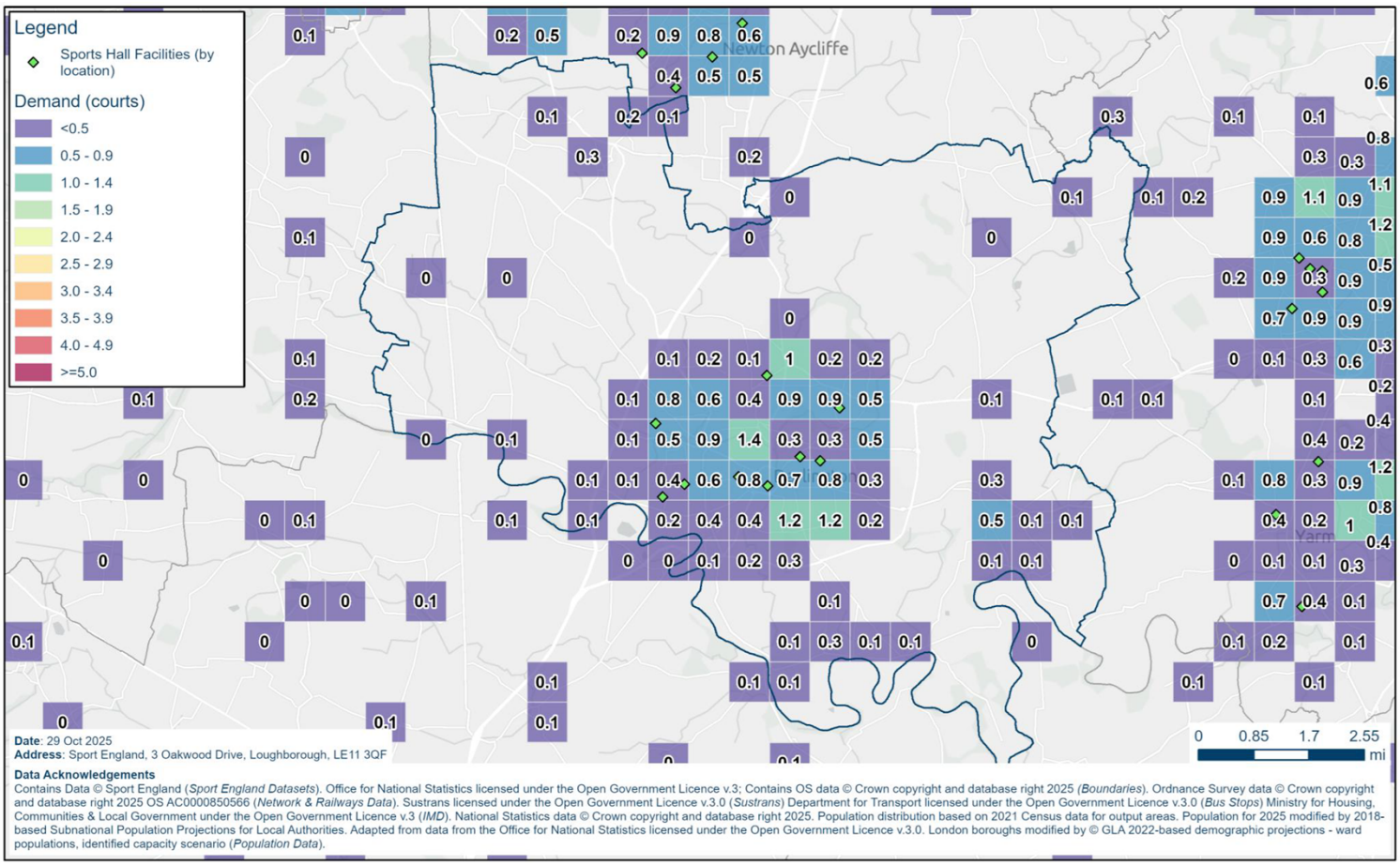


8.224 Demand per square kilometre is highest in Darlington town, at 1.4 courts (dark-green square in Map 10.2 below). There is demand for 1.2 courts in two square kilometres in Firthmoor, and for 1.0 courts in Branksome. The only sports hall in any of these locations is Wyvern Academy in Branksome. Demand is highest in the following areas; *1.2 courts in Middleton St George across six square kilometres, in Hurworth-on-Tees and Neasham, there is demand for 0.8 courts across six square kilometres. Beyond these areas, demand is mostly between 0.1 and 0.4 courts per square kilometre (purple squares). There are large areas in the north of the Borough where there is no demand.*



8.225 In Darlington, 24% of the population does not have access to a car. This is lower than the regional average of 27% but higher than the national average of 23%. Of Darlington's residents, 65% are within a 20-minute walk of at least one sports hall. Residents in parts of Darlington town centre and to the west of Darlington town are within a 20-minute walk of two sports halls. Residents in a very small part of Darlington town centre can walk to between three and four sports halls within 20 minutes. However, not all residents in these areas will walk to a sports hall and some will travel further. It is estimated that 18% of all journeys to sports halls are made on foot.

8.226 The percentage of the population without access to a car influences travel patterns to sports halls. A low percentage means that there is likely to be a larger number of journeys to sports halls by car. For residents without access to a car, travel to sports halls by public transport and on foot become the choices of travel mode. It is estimated that 72% of journeys to sports halls by Darlington residents are made by car in 2025. This is lower than the proportion in neighbouring local authority areas. The regional average is 70% and the national average is 74%.

8.227 A very large proportion of Darlington's satisfied demand is therefore met within the Borough, at 89%. The sports halls are very accessible to the Borough's residents. 97% of Darlington's demand for sports halls is met. This is higher than the regional average and national average of 95%. Unmet demand accounts for 3% of Darlington's demand, the equivalent of 254 visits in the weekly peak period. Unmet demand totals the equivalent of 0.9 courts. Residents who are too far from a sports hall account for all the unmet demand.

8.228 There is unmet demand of 0.1 courts in two square kilometres southeast of Darlington town centre. Across the rest of the Borough unmet demand per square kilometre is less than 0.1 courts. Unmet demand is concentrated in the Darlington town centre area, Middleton St George, Hurworth-on-Tees and Neasham. The largest amount of reachable unmet demand per square kilometre is 0.4 courts in 26 square kilometres distributed across the south of the Borough from the west of Darlington town centre to the border with Stockton-on-Tees.

8.229 This amount of unmet demand is however insufficient to consider building a new sports hall to improve accessibility for residents at any location in the Borough.

Availability

8.230 The overall estimated used capacity of the sports halls in Darlington during the weekly peak period is 51%. This is lower than the regional average of 57% and the national average of 66%. The estimated used capacity of the sports halls in the neighbouring local authority areas is highest in County Durham at 52% and lowest in North Yorkshire at 42%. Darlington's sports halls meet a total of 7,335 visits in the weekly peak period. There are several reasons for the variation in estimated used capacity by site, overall it reflects the reliance on education provision..

8.231 A sports hall on an educational site that has limited daytime access, is only available for a few hours a week, and with an irregular pattern of use, is very different from a public leisure centre sports hall with a full programme of use.

8.232 None of the sports hall sites is estimated to be uncomfortably full in the weekly peak period (more than 80% of capacity used). The most highly utilised site is the Dolphin Centre.

8.233 The sports halls do therefore appear to have unused capacity at peak times, access, particularly in terms of continuity, and management rather than supply is therefore the key issue. Football use dominates several sports hall programmes. The educational sports hall supply does however need to be protected for community use, in order to ensure this balance remains. There should also be efforts to ensure club needs and availability are better matched and sports hall programmes reflect the broad needs beyond football.

8.234 The Dolphin Centre is the most important site in the Borough. Given the eight-courts it should focus on specialist sport's needs. It is the largest site and meets the greatest number of visits. The centre is available to all residents and provides for all activities. It is located in the area of highest demand and highest deprivation and is therefore a vital provision.

Summary Supply

Quantity

8.235 Darlington has 16 sports halls across ten sites that are available for community use. The total sports hall space in Darlington is the equivalent of 56.3 badminton courts. The space available for community use in the weekly peak period is the equivalent of 42.9 courts. The resident population generates demand for 7,657 visits in the weekly peak period, which equates to 26.0 courts with a comfort factor included. This is 16.9 courts fewer than Darlington's available supply, supply therefore exceeds demand.

8.236 Darlington has 4.9 courts per 10,000 population. This is higher than the regional average of 4.7 courts per 10,000 population and the national average of 4.0 courts, so the supply is good and the borough is well provided for.

8.237 Given that nearly all the sports hall stock is provided by the educational sector, the supply does however restrict residents who require access during weekday daytimes and places greater reliance and pressure on The Dolphin Centre to provide for these residents. Furthermore it also creates challenges in terms of access and continuity of use, particularly during exam time and can restrict specialist sports use, both in terms of access and the sports halls not being fully *fit for purpose* in terms of technical specifications and dimensions. This was a key issue raised through consultation with clubs and National Governing Bodies (NGBs).

8.238 So the quantity of sports hall provision is good as is the location of provision, there are no significant gaps, requiring additional provision. There may be a case for specialist new indoor provision and smaller scale hall provision in localities.

8.239 What is also evident is the importance of the education stock to maintain this balance and ensuring the right scale of provision. Protecting on-going access to the school sports hall stock will therefore also be important strategically going forward. Growth will impact on the capacity. There will therefore also be a need for on-going investment in the sports hall stock.

Quality

8.240 The average age of the sports hall sites in 2025 is therefore 30 years. Two of the three sites opened before 2000 have been refurbished, but none of the four sites opened between 2004 and 2009 has been modernised. There is an increasing need for refurbishment of the sports halls. There is therefore an increasing need for refurbishment of the sports halls as the stock ages. The oldest sport hall site is Carmel College, which opened in 1960 and is unmodernised, as was the case in the previous strategy. Ensuring any upgrades and investment meet required sports and club technical requirements will be important.

8.241 The assessment illustrates that whilst the supply of sports halls in terms of quantity is good, given the predominance of education providers, there are challenges in terms of access*, fitness for purpose,* in respect of critical dimensions and technical requirements. Alongside the ageing nature of the stock, there will therefore be a need for on-going investment.

Accessibility

8.242 A very large proportion of Darlington's satisfied demand is therefore met within the Borough, at 89%. The sports halls are very accessible to the Borough's residents. 97% of Darlington's demand for sports halls is met. This is higher than the regional average and national average of 95%. Unmet demand accounts for 3% of Darlington's demand, the equivalent of 254 visits in the weekly peak period. Unmet demand totals the equivalent of 0.9 courts. Residents who are too far from a sports hall account for all the unmet demand. This amount of unmet demand is however insufficient to consider building a new sports hall to improve accessibility for residents at any location in the Borough.

8.243 The sports hall sites and the Darlington demand for sports halls are very well correlated. Any consideration to change the sports hall sites, is unlikely to improve on this level of accessibility. Any future investment should therefore focus on existing sites and current locations, there is no case for additional sports hall provision at new locations, although specialist provision and smaller flexible spaces could be considered in the context of growth and based on feasibility work at the time.

Availability

8.244 None of the sports hall sites is estimated to be uncomfortably full in the weekly peak period (more than 80% of capacity used). The most highly utilised site is the Dolphin Centre.

8.245 The sports halls do therefore appear to have unused capacity at peak times, access, particularly in terms of continuity, and management rather than supply is therefore the key issue. Football use dominates several sports hall programmes. The educational sports hall supply does however need to be protected for community use, in order to ensure this balance remains. There should also be efforts to ensure club needs and availability are better matched and sports hall programmes reflect the broad needs beyond football.

8.246 The Dolphin Centre is the most important site in the Borough. Given the eight-courts it should focus on specialist sport's needs. It is the largest site and meets the greatest number of visits. The centre is available to all residents and provides for all activities. It is located in the area of highest demand and highest deprivation and is therefore a vital provision.

8.247 So, the main sports hall sites are busy and there are pressures on the usage, this was borne out through the site visits and consultation. Further growth will impact on sports hall capacity to deliver going forward. It will remain important to maintain and seek to increase access to education halls.

Demand

Participation Trends

8.248 Indoor multi-purpose sports and activity halls are prime facilities for community sport and physical activity. The standard method for measuring sports halls is the number of badminton courts.

8.249 Smaller one and two court sized halls often offer an informal, attractive environment in which to get active for people who are not as comfortable in *traditional* formal sports settings. Activities such as exercise, dance and yoga often take place in smaller indoor spaces in community settings.

8.250 Individual activities which require little organisation and are available at times that suit the lifestyle of participants are becoming more popular. Gym and fitness classes are activities with a health benefit/motivation and are recreational. These may be more appealing, than playing sports where skill development is needed and can be competition based, both of which appear to be appealing to a smaller range of participants.

8.251 There is some emerging national evidence that there is less use of sports halls for sport. There is a decline in traditional sports hall sports, as the physical activity agenda gains momentum and the need for more flexible indoor spaces over formal sports halls gains traction e.g. less than 1% of a typical sports hall activity programme is filled by for example cricket and netball etc. the growth in the provision of dance studios is a testament to this. Sport England themselves are recognising this by promoting smaller, more flexible indoor halls as part of their new innovation programmes. This trend is emerging in larger halls as well, as sports hall sites become

increasingly programmed for group exercise. Any new provision focussed around growth may need to recognise this emerging need in locality settings.

8.252 These facilities do however fall below the threshold for formal assessment of *quality, quantity and accessibility* due to their inability to offer the range of sports that a larger 4-court hall can offer.

8.253 A 4-court sports hall provides for indoor team and individual sports such as badminton, 5-a-side football, basketball and netball. It also has sufficient length to accommodate indoor cricket nets and indoor athletics. Larger halls, those with six or eight courts, can accommodate higher level training and/or competition. They also provide an option for more than one court, increasing flexibility for both training and competition and hosting of indoor central venue leagues for sports such as netball.

8.254 As set out in the supply section, the sports halls analysis in this report has focussed on 4-court halls and above. There is only one facility with more than 4-courts, located at the Dolphin Centre, which restricts more higher levels of training and competition.

8.255 Despite changes in participation trends there are still several strong sports hall sports across Darlington, and needs, which have emerged via clubs and NGBs. NGBs and active clubs have been consulted to ascertain and understand current use, participation trends and needs and challenges of sports hall facilities in the area.

NGB and Club Consultation

Netball

8.256 In terms of NGB discussions England Netball, raised the following key issues:

- There is lots of Netball activity in Darlington, both social teams and leagues
- Revive Netball – which is the return to netball model – play wherever – they hold tournaments at the Dolphin Centre and train at Humersknott
- Headlanders the main club use both Carmel College and Longfield Academy
- Whilst there is a good supply of sports halls, these are located on school sites, where school exams always impact on programming. Toilet and changing access can also be a challenge and clubs are at the whim of caretakers or school letting companies
- Furthermore several sites did not re-open after covid, access and security of bookings is also a challenge for the sport – football always appears to take priority
- As highlighted in the previous analysis, the education stock is also getting increasingly old with lighting and leaking roofs becoming a challenge
- According the NGB, the sport ideally needs a double court facilities as only the Dolphin across Darlington provides this and the programme is busy and parking a challenge
- The key priorities would be to address continuity of access to sports halls and the dominance of football in the programmes and the provision of a dedicated venue of more than one netball court.

8.257 Consultation with the Headlanders Netball Club confirmed these concerns and the need for a purpose built indoor facility of 2 dedicated netball courts, plus ancillary provision. The club have plans to deliver this and there is evidence to support this aspiration and the need for dedicated provision, which meets technical standards and provides continuity of access.

Tennis

8.258 The LTA also have a priority for dedicated indoor tennis provision. Darlington has long been identified as a priority area for indoor tennis. Whether there is potential for joint use with other sports would depend on surface, specifications and programming.

8.259 It remains a key priority of the NGB to deliver at least one indoor tennis facility in Darlington, the LTA model identifies this as a priority need. Current options include Polam Hall School and / or Longfield Academy. The LTA have been in recent dialogue with Polam Hall, and this could align with the need to upgrade and refurbish the schools indoor hall provision. The LTA are also committed to engaging with Longfield Academy. The LTA are currently in discussions with government to secure funding for indoor tennis projects.

8.260 If the delivery of indoor space is not achievable, the delivery of 'covered courts' should be prioritised across Darlington.

Badminton

8.261 Badminton England's vision is to be the most inclusive and accessible sport in England. The strategy focuses on young people, especially primary-age children, to start, stay, and progress in badminton, and on inclusion, ensuring safe, welcoming, and diverse environments that connect everyone to the sport and support its long-term growth.

8.262 The Places Strategy focuses on ensuring accessible, safe, and welcoming places to play badminton. It aims to protect existing facilities, open new and non-traditional venues, develop dedicated badminton spaces, expand school and community access, drive easier digital booking, and build strong partnerships with facility providers to grow participation across all levels of the sport.

8.263 Badminton England report that there are 4 affiliated badminton clubs across Darlington, as follows;

- Dolphin Premier Badminton Club
- Haughton Badminton Club
- Hummersknott Badminton Club
- Larchfield Badminton Club

8.264 In terms of supply and demand, they report a positive supply and demand balance of plus 2.8 courts, with unmet demand of 0.5 courts. This changes to 2.4 courts and minus 0.7 in 20230. This accords with the fpm analysis, which concludes that supply and demand is positive but pressures will increase over time with growth.

8.265 Darlington is not a specific priority area for Badminton England.

8.266 Dolphin Premier Badminton Club has 50+ adult and junior members. Originally formed in 1989, there are 4 active coaches and volunteers. The club is open to all levels and ages. Consultation with the club reveals that providing coaching across all abilities is challenging in group sessions, it requires a high level of support when managing this across 8 courts. At the moment the club do not have the coverage of coaches to fully support the coaching needs to older juniors and seniors in one session.

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8.267 The aims of the club are to develop senior badminton in league competition, expanding junior badminton coaching and inter-club competition, increasing volunteer support and development of coaches.

8.268 They club currently play at the Dolphin Centre, with senior sessions from Thursday 6pm to 8pm, using 4 courts and family sessions on Sunday from 1:30pm to 3:30pm, using all 8 courts. The court surface is rated as good however the lighting is considered poor, according to the club, and requires improvement to follow BE guidelines for type and position above courts, in order to reduce glare and improve vision.

Volleyball

8.269 The key strategic plan for volleyball is, The Game Plan, which aims to see; thriving regions, counties, clubs and stakeholders (Volleyball England Foundation, British Volleyball Federation) that are built on solid standards and who are supported towards achieving their potential. In terms of facilities it aspires to providing high quality facility guidance documents to enable clubs/partners and Volleyball England to explore facility development and ownership.

8.270 Although the North East Volleyball Association covers the whole of the North East, it is then broken into Northern Counties and Tees Valley (of which Darlington is part of). The NEVA feel that volleyball is underrepresented in sports halls, with several halls equipped for football, netball, table tennis, badminton etc but very few for volleyball. The NGB would therefore always welcome more investment into volleyball in any refurbishment programme.

8.271 The north east s poorly served by facilities and has a much wider potential for growth. The key venues in Darlington are Haughton School, which is used by Haughton Volleyball Club and the Education Village, which is used by Darlington Volleyball Club. Clubs report in this year's club survey that facilities are one of the biggest barriers to growth, access to suitable venues and at suitable times.

Table Tennis

8.272 NGB engagement did not uncover any key needs.

8.273 In terms of clubs, Darlington Table Tennis Academy was established 14 years ago. Membership is on average 90-100 members and has steadily increased over the years. There is currently a waiting list.

8.274 There are now 2 leagues operating under the Academy, going from 10 teams to 20 teams from various clubs. Members now include pupils from over 20 schools from Darlington and the surrounding areas. Also the Academy training programme, this allows young people to achieve their true potential with many of the players now playing in the National Regional League and British League.

8.275 The Academy operates out of Hummersknott Academy, which is considered excellent by the Academy. They run 4 evening sessions a week totalling 8 hours. Sometimes additional bookings can interfere with set up time and the Academy also lose the main sports hall for 10 weeks a year due to exams. Sessions have to be moved into different rooms but they are fragmented and not always ideal for timing for the younger children and adults. Also storage is a challenging area, having to deal with 25 tables and other equipment, space is at a premium.

8.276 Flexibility on timing and continuity of use is therefore a key challenge for the Academy. Dedicated provision, would help to tackle this and enable them to tackle the waiting list and also to consider hosting national events.

8.277 Darlington Dolphins table tennis club, train people from 7 to 80 or older to become the best version of themselves they can be to play table tennis, twice a week with two-hour sessions on a Monday and a Friday evening. Monday's sessions are 7 to 9pm, Friday's are 6 to 8pm, All are welcome.

8.278 The aims are to increase interest and participation in table tennis within the Northeast. We would like to hold national competitions within Darlington but need the facilities to do this. In order to achieve this the club currently play and train out of the Dolphin centre.

8.279 The facilities are of average quality, the lighting is poor and barely good enough to train and at times not good enough to play competitive table tennis in the local league. Every session the tables need to set up and put away, causing damage and degradation of the tables. There can be lots of noise from the other areas of the sports hall with Football often taking place.

8.280 Access to set up for our sessions is adequate, getting packed away when our sessions finish can be a bit rushed, on a Monday we finish at 9pm, the Centre closes then so we have to stop the sessions early. On a Friday the sessions start is as per previously stated, also when we finish at 8pm, We have the same issue, we must be packed up and out of the sports hall by 8pm as the Dolphin centre staff need to often set up for another session of other sports after we have gone.

8.281 We need a bespoke home for table tennis, with good parking facilities. If we were to have a facility in the town where we could leave the tables in place permanently, with more time for more sessions, to help develop our players to their maximum potential, hopefully a British or World champion.

Basketball

8.282 Darlington Storm Basketball Club has sessions available for 6-60 year olds. With inclusive sessions for 10-25 year olds. The club currently has around 100 members and competes in local leagues.

8.283 They train and play at Longfield Academy, Woodham Academy, Hummersknott Academy and Queen Elizabeth Sixth form college. According to the club Longfield will be due a new floor soon, and side baskets need small repairs. Woodham is considered good. Hummersknott needs an upgrade on facilities including, flooring, lighting and basketball hoops. Queen Elizabeth ideally needs more hoops.

8.284 The aim of the club is to go National League. At the moment this is not possible due to lack of hall availability which meets national standards. Ideally, the club need a double sized sports hall with seating and height adjustable hoops. Having a dedicated facility which provides continuity of use is the aim. Due to exams being in sports halls the club are losing out on the biggest times of year for new recruits (new year and spring to summer).

Consultation Summary

8.285 In terms of sports halls the conclusion of the fpm was that, there is sufficient supply to meet Darlington's demand. There is not a need to increase provision for community sport, but there are clearly access challenges for clubs around continuity of use. The available supply needs to be protected for community use and modernised, with the needs of clubs in mind, to ensure technical requirements are met. Investment is required in the sports hall stock and there is some justification for additional large indoor space to meet specialist sport needs, of which netball and tennis have key needs, along with basketball and table tennis. Whether there are opportunities for a multi-sport indoor solution should be explored.

8.286 The implications for Darlington are that there are not enough large halls for sport, specialist provision is not well catered for. This provision has to be protected and access and investment

protected going forward, alongside potential investment in a network of smaller community spaces for health and physical activity programmes in localities.

Impact of Growth

8.287 The draft Local Plan review sets out a series of housing growth scenarios. It reports that housing will be delivered to meet a minimum requirement of 446 net additional dwellings over the plan period from 2025 to 2042 (which represents a slight reduction on the adopted plan). This results in a total net minimum requirement of 7582 dwellings. The adopted Local Plan, as well as the Local Plan Review note that a large proportion of growth will focus on the existing main urban core of Darlington via sites within the main urban area and strategic extensions, as well as in neighbourhood areas.

8.288 The Plan provides detail on the proposed growth in specific neighbourhoods. Those with anticipated growth above 500 dwellings are;

- Middleton St George 742 houses
- Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent (1405 houses).

8.289 The adopted local plan also proposed significant growth in Hurworth (816 houses, adjusted to 364 in the Local Plan Review). Strategic extensions will be focused to the north east and west of the main urban area, with smaller scale extensions also proposed around the main urban fringe. The Local Plan Review suggests that 3,266 new dwellings will be delivered up to 2035 (the period covered by this strategy).

8.290 The Local Plan Review (now out for consultation) suggests that the following sites will accommodate greater than 400 dwellings up to 2036;

- West Park Garden Village (538). 90 additional dwellings also delivered on West Park Garden Village North up to 2036
- Burtree Garden Village (1170) 360 of which delivered after 2036
- Consicliffe Park South (475 total), 60 delivered after 2036
- Greater Faverdale (750), 1250 after 2036
- Coniscliffe Park North (930 total), 360 delivered after 2036
- Skerningham (1950), 900 of which are after 2036

8.291 The above represent a similar growth strategy to that set out in the current adopted Local Plan. The strategy document will consider the specific impact of the above key developments in order to provide guidance as to how decisions should be made to ensure that the needs arising from the new developments are addressed.

8.292 Growth generated by new housing development will add further pressures and forecasts of the adequacy of provision to meet future demand confirm that increased capacity will be necessary. This strategy seeks to ensure that all new development contributes to providing the increased capacity that is necessary.

8.293 There is an evidence base to support continued investment in the sports halls network and application of the Sport England Sports Facility Calculator (SFC) cost findings, to accommodate any requirements to invest in sports halls to accommodate the increased usage will be applicable at the time any major developments come forward.

8.294 So, growth will impact on sports hall needs in terms of the existing supply, which will become busier. Investment should focus on the existing network not providing additional provision, and potentially the need for additional small-scale provision and delivering dedicated specialist space.

8.295 To do this, this Strategy and Action Plan promotes the use of the Sport England Playing Pitch Calculator (PPC) and Sports Facility Calculator (SFC) to assess the impact of each specific new development. This approach is also reflected in draft policy in the emerging Local Plan Review. The Strategy and Action Plan sets out how this will be applied. In terms of sports halls, contributions should focus on the following priorities;

- Refurbishment and investment in the current stock to maintain quality, capacity and deliver technical requirements for specialist sport and club use
- Delivery of potential large scale dedicated indoor provision
- Small scale provision to deliver physical activity programmes in localities.

Demand Summary

8.296 In terms of sports halls the conclusion of the fpm was that, there is sufficient supply to meet Darlington's demand. There is not a need to increase provision for community sport, but there are clearly access challenges for clubs around continuity of use. The available supply needs to be protected for community use and modernised, with the needs of clubs in mind, to ensure technical requirements are met. Investment is required in the sports hall stock and there is some justification for additional large indoor space to meet specialist sport needs, of which netball and tennis have key needs, along with basketball and table tennis. Whether there are opportunities for a multi-sport indoor solution should be explored.

8.297 The implications for Darlington are that there are not enough large halls for sport, specialist provision is not well catered for. This provision has to be protected and access and investment protected going forward, alongside potential investment in a network of smaller community spaces for health and physical activity programmes in localities.

8.298 There is an evidence base to support continued investment in the sports halls network and application of the Sport England Sports Facility Calculator (SFC) cost findings, to accommodate any requirements to invest is sports halls to accommodate the increased usage will be applicable at the time any major developments come forward.

8.299 So, growth will impact on sports hall needs in terms of the existing supply, which will become busier. Investment should focus on the existing network not providing additional provision, and potentially the need for additional small-scale provision and delivering dedicated specialist space.

Summary - Key Issues Sports Halls

Introduction

8.300 The ANOG approach requires a drawing together of the key issues which have arisen from the assessment, these are set out below along with a summary of the position in-line with the ANOG framework.

8.301 The key issues for sports hall that need to be considered as part of the strategy development are therefore summarised in the table overleaf.

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Summary – Key Issues for Sports Hall in Darlington

Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• Darlington has 16 sports halls across ten sites that are available for community use • The total sports hall space in Darlington is the equivalent of 56.3 badminton courts. The space available for community use in the weekly peak period is the equivalent of 42.9 courts • Darlington has 4.9 courts per 10,000 population. This is higher than the regional average of 4.7 courts per 10,000 population and the national average of 4.0 courts, so the supply is good and the borough is well provided for • However the Dolphin Centre is the only public leisure centre in Darlington • The educational sector provides nine of the ten sites, accounting for circa 80% of the available capacity in the weekly peak period. The Dolphin Centre is the only public leisure centre and provides 21% of the available capacity in the weekly peak period • Polam Hall School, which did not have a sports hall at the time of the last strategy, have planning permission for a new 3-court hall, which will add further to the educational supply • The largest individual sports hall in Darlington is the eight-court main hall at the Dolphin Centre. This size of sports hall can accommodate multiple sports activities at the same time, while also providing a show court for events with spectator seating and specialist sport use • The remaining main halls are all four-court halls • The average age of the sports hall sites in 2025 is 30 years. The Dolphin Centre opened in 1982 and was refurbished in 2006. Two of the three sites opened before 2000 have been refurbished, but none of the four sites opened between 2004 and 2009 has been modernised.	• Given that nearly all the sports hall stock is provided by the educational sector, this does restrict residents who require access during weekday daytimes and places greater reliance and pressure on The Dolphin Centre to provide for these residents • Furthermore it also creates challenges in terms of access and continuity of use, particularly during exam time and can restrict specialist sports use, both in terms of access and sports halls being fit for purpose in terms of technical specifications • There is an increasing need for refurbishment of the sports halls as the stock ages. The oldest sport hall site is Carmel College, which opened in 1960 and is unmodernised, as was the case in the previous strategy • Ensuring any upgrades and investment meet required sports and club technical requirements will be important • The Dolphin Centre is the most highly utilised, which adds to the pressures set out above. There appears scope for greater access and usage at the education sites, but this will have to be balanced against competing pressures from schools • These technical, access and management challenges are being faced by clubs across the borough in respect of sports halls.

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Demand	• 97% of Darlington's demand for sports halls is met. This is higher than the regional average and national average of 95% • A large proportion of Darlington's satisfied demand is met within the Borough, at 89%. The sports halls are very accessible to the Borough's residents • Unmet demand totals the equivalent of 0.9 courts. Residents who are too far from a sports hall account for all the unmet demand. Unmet demand of 0.1 courts in two square kilometres southeast of Darlington town centre. Across the rest of the Borough unmet demand per square kilometre is less than 0.1 courts. Unmet demand is concentrated in the Darlington town centre area, Middleton St George, Hurworth-on-Tees and Neasham. The largest amount of reachable unmet demand per square kilometre is 0.4 courts in 26 square kilometres distributed across the south of the Borough from the west of Darlington town centre • The overall estimated used capacity of the sports halls in Darlington during the weekly peak period is 51%. This is lower than the regional average of 57% and the national average of 66%.	• There is sufficient supply to meet Darlington's demand, there is not a need to increase provision. However, the available supply needs to be protected for community use • The demand for sports halls is met by the accessible supply. Nearly all the satisfied demand is met within the Borough. Unmet demand is very low • The sports halls do however have unused capacity at peak times, access and management rather than supply is therefore the key issue. The educational sports hall supply needs to be protected for community use, in order to ensure this balance remains • The Dolphin Centre is the most important site in the Borough. It is the largest site and meets the greatest number of visits. The centre is available to all residents and provides for all activities. It is located in the area of highest demand and highest deprivation and it therefore a vital provision.
Key Issues for Strategy to address	• There is sufficient supply to meet Darlington's demand, there is not a need to increase provision. However, the available supply needs to be protected for community use • The demand for sports halls is met by the accessible supply. Nearly all the satisfied demand is met within the Borough. Unmet demand is very low. The sports halls do however have unused capacity at peak times, access and management rather than supply is therefore the key issue to address	

	for clubs and specialist sports use • The Dolphin Centre is the most important site in the Borough. It is the largest site and meets the greatest number of visits. The centre is available to all residents and provides for all activities. It is located in the area of highest demand and highest deprivation and it therefore a vital provision • New demand generated by residential development, can be met in the main by the existing Darlington supply of sports halls. However there will be increase in usage/throughput across the sports hall sites, which will have impacts, the capacity at sports halls will be more stretched. This will be further exacerbated if school sports hall access alters • There is general capacity to cope with growth but there will be impacts, particularly at Dolphin Centre, where there will be a need for on-going investment and modernisation. Increased pressure on the Dolphin centre, priority for investment • Given its age the educational sports hall supply also needs to be invested in and protected for community use • Supply and demand therefore clearly illustrates that there will be impacts of the projected growth that will require financial contributions. Investment should therefore be sought investment to improve the quality and capacity at the key sports hall sites in line with the application of Sport England's Sports Facility Calculator tool • Contributions from developments should be sought in the main to maintain and enhance the sports hall stock, in terms of upgrading and refurbishment future sports hall investment should set out a need based on sports development and NGB requirements • Any new provision should clearly meet identified gaps, following consideration of supply and demand balance at the time and should focus on smaller flexible spaces to deliver health and physical activity programmes in localities.

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Swimming Pool Supply

Quantity and Quality

8.302 There are eight swimming pools across six sites in Darlington that are available for community use, as set out in table 10.2 below.

8.303 The resident population generates demand for 7,059 visits in the weekly peak period, which is below the available capacity of 10,618 visits. The water space required to meet Darlington's demand comfortably is 1,161 sqm of water, which is below the Borough's available supply of 1,213 sqm of water.

8.304 Darlington has 16 sqm of water per 1,000 population, which is the highest provision in the wider study area. It is higher than the regional average of 12 sqm of water per 1,000 population and the national average of 11 sqm of water.

Table 10.1 – Darlington Swimming Pools Halls 2026

Site	Provider	Facility Type	Dimensions (m)	Area (sqm)	Year Built	Year Refurb	Peak Hours	Total Hours	Site Capacity (visits per week in peak period)
The Dolphin Centre	Public	8-lane	25 x 18	450	1982	2023	25.3	51.7	5,345
		4-lane	25 x 10	250			52.5	104.3	
		Diving	12 x 12	144			52.5	104.3	
Darlington Education Village	Educational	4-lane	25 x 9	225	2006		25.5	33.5	956
Hummersknott Academy	Educational	4-lane	20 x 8	160	1965	2005	37.5	47	1,000
Longfield Academy	Educational	4-lane	20 x 8	160	1968	2013	32.5	42.5	867
Bannatyne Health Club	Commercial	3-lane	20 x 6	120	2001	2004	52.5	111.5	1,050
Rockliffe Hall	Commercial	4-lane	20 x 8	160	2009	2015	52.5	101	1,400

8.305 There is one public leisure centre in Darlington, The Dolphin Centre, which is operated in-house by the Council. It is the largest swimming pool site in the Borough and the only site with more than one pool. Overall, the scale of the public leisure centre means that it is fit for purpose and can accommodate the following activities; *casual recreational swimming, lane and fitness swimming, learn-to-swim and swimming development through clubs (including diving).*

8.306 The educational sector is the largest provider in terms of sites, with three of the six sites. Access at these sites depends on the policy of each individual school/college towards community use. The three educational pool sites in the Borough are all single pools.

8.307 Darlington Education Village is operated in-house under a PFI contract, this is due to come to an end. It is available for hire to swimming clubs and also operates a learn-to-swim school. Hummersknott Academy is operated in-house but also uses School Hire, an external online platform, for advertising and booking its facilities. The pool is available for community hire and operates a learn-to-swim school through two external providers.

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8.308 Humersknott underwent a programme of investment in the summer of 2025, where over £200,000 was spent to secure the life of the facility for a further 10-years. The school are committed to the pool and value it as an asset.

8.309 Longfield Academy is operated in-house and is available to residents through membership for recreational and fitness swimming activities. The school also operates a learn-to-swim programme through an external provider.

8.310 All education sites are committed and value their swimming pool provision. The pools appear currently secure in the medium term, but it will remain a challenge for education providers and any reduction in the education supply will impact in the supply and demand balance. It is therefore critical that investment continues across the education stock to maintain quality and access.

8.311 There is limited casual swimming at the education sites. They are keen and there are opportunities to enhance programmes at the education sites, particularly at Longfield.

8.312 There are two commercial providers; both are single-pool sites. Rockliffe Hall swimming pool is available for community use for residents who hold a spa or resort membership. Bannatyne Health Club is available for community use through membership. It provides for recreational swimming and also operates a learn-to-swim school on a one-to-one or one-to-two basis.

8.313 The Dolphin Centre has an eight-lane 25m x 18m pool, a four-lane 25m x 10m pool and a 12m x 12m diving pool. The site can accommodate 5,345 visits in the weekly peak period. It has nearly four times the capacity of the next-largest site and provides 50% of the available capacity in the Borough. It is a critical site, particularly in respect of casual swimming.

8.314 Darlington Education Village is the largest of the educational sites. It has a four-lane 25m x 9m pool. However, it has the second-largest capacity of the educational sites, at 956 visits in the weekly peak period, because it is available for fewer hours than the other two sites. Both Hummersknott Academy and Longfield Academy are four-lane 20m x 8m pools, designed on the same model. Hummersknott Academy has the highest availability and capacity of the educational sites, at 1,000 visits in the weekly peak period. Longfield Academy can accommodate 867 visits in the weekly peak period.

8.315 Rockliffe Hall is also a four-lane 20m x 8m pool and can accommodate 1,400 visits in the weekly peak period. Bannatyne Health Club is the smallest swimming pool site in the Borough, with a three-lane 20m x 6m pool that can accommodate 1,050 visits per week.

8.316 The swimming pool stock is ageing. The average age of all the sites is 37 years and the only public leisure centre is 43 years old. However, there is a good track record of modernisation, with five of the six sites having been refurbished, including The Dolphin Centre in 2023. It is however critical that this continues to maintain the supply and demand balance.

Accessibility

8.317 Two sites are located in Darlington town centre: The Dolphin Centre and Bannatyne Health Club, see Map 10.3 overleaf. Darlington Education Village and Longfield Academy are located north of Darlington town, Hummersknott Academy is in the west of the Borough and Rockliffe Hall is in the south. There are no swimming pool sites in the north of the Borough. Newton Aycliffe Leisure Centre in County Durham is the closest site to Darlington. It has a six-lane 25m x 13m pool and a 12m x 8m teaching pool. It was opened in 1974 and refurbished in 2016. The centre is accessible to some Darlington residents in the north of the Borough.

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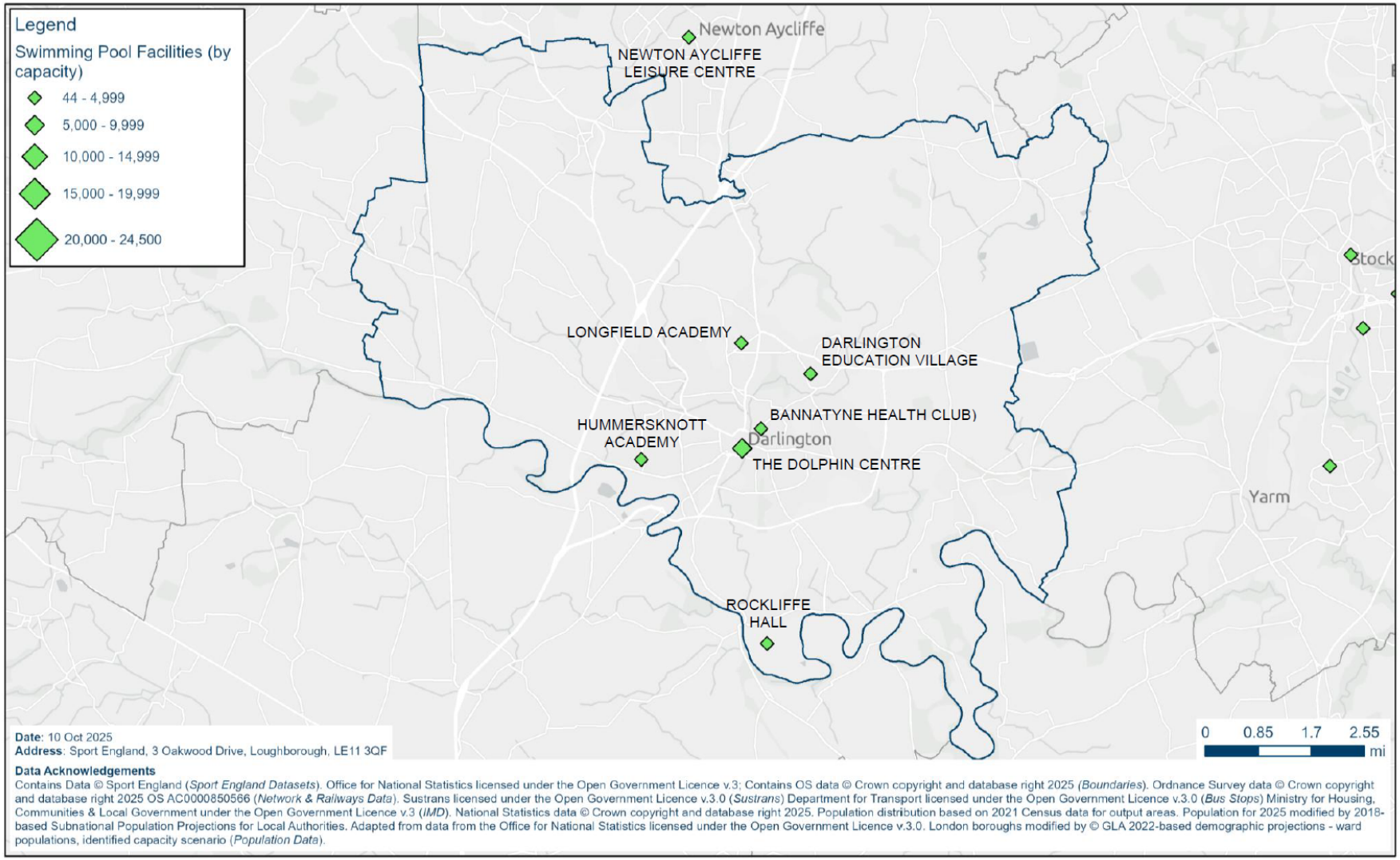
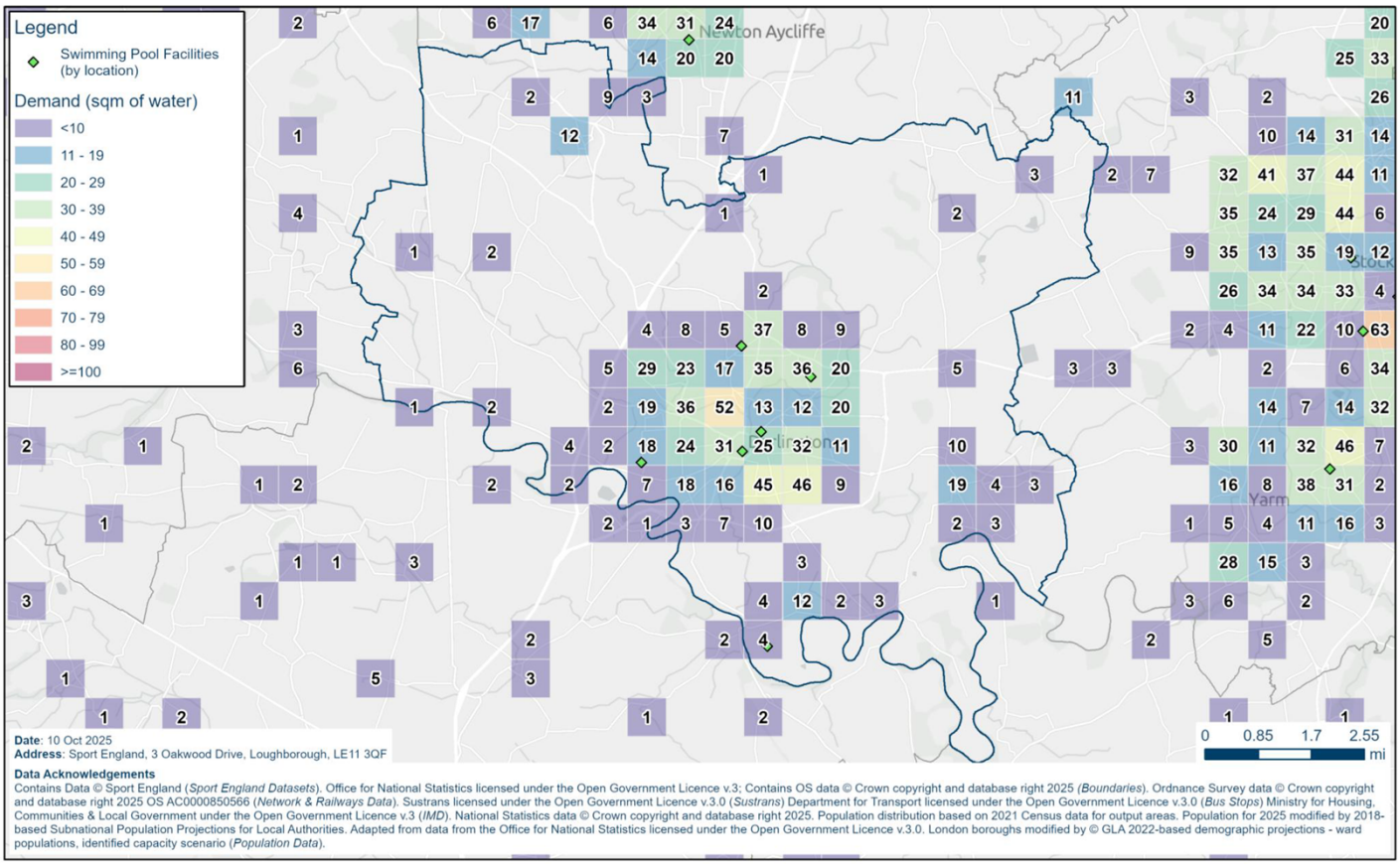


8.318 Map 10.3 below illustrates demand per square kilometre is highest in Darlington town centre, at 52 sqm of water (light-orange square) and 46 and 45 sqm of water (yellow squares). The Dolphin Centre is mid-way between these three squares. Demand is highest in the following areas;

- Southeast of Darlington town centre – 148 sqm of water across four square kilometres
- Darlington town centre – 143 sqm of water across four square kilometres
- Between Harrowgate Hill and Haughton-le-Skerne – 116 sqm of water across four square kilometres

8.319 There is demand of 41 sqm of water across six square kilometres in Middleton St George and 28 sqm of water across six square kilometres in Hurworth-on-Tees. Beyond these areas, demand is mainly between 1 and 19 sqm of water per square kilometre (purple and blue squares). There is very little demand in the north of the Borough. Demand is highest in Harrowgate Hill, at 26 sqm of water across four square kilometres. There is total demand of 5 sqm of water across two square kilometres in the northeast of the Borough.



8.320 In Darlington, 24% of the population does not have access to a car. This is lower than the regional average of 27% but higher than the national average of 23%. The percentage of the population without access to a car influences travel patterns to swimming pools. A low percentage means there is likely to be a larger number of journeys to swimming pools by car. For residents without access to a car, travel to swimming pools by public transport and on foot become the choices of travel mode.

8.321 It is estimated that 69% of journeys to swimming pools by Darlington residents are made by car in 2025. This is lower than the proportion in neighbouring local authority areas and the regional average (71%) and national average (74%).

8.322 97% of the demand for swimming pools from Darlington residents is met. This is the highest proportion in the study area, and higher than both the regional and national averages of 93%.

8.323 A very high proportion of Darlington's demand is met within the Borough, at 90%. This proportion is the highest in the study area. There is a close correlation between the swimming pool locations and areas of highest demand, access is therefore good.

8.324 Unmet demand accounts for 3% of Darlington's demand, the equivalent of 221 visits in the weekly peak period. Unmet demand totals 36 sqm of water with a comfort factor included. Residents who are too far from a swimming pool account for 98% of this. Unmet demand because of a lack of swimming pool capacity equates to less than 1 sqm of water.

8.325 The most unmet demand can be met in Haughton-le-Skerne and Morton Park Way, at 47 sqm of water, this includes unmet demand from Stockton-on-Tees. This is insufficient to consider building a new swimming pool at either location at present, but future growth may impact on this and should be assessed at the time.

Availability

8.326 The overall estimated used capacity of swimming pools in Darlington during the weekly peak period is 71%. This is higher than the regional average of 70% but lower than the national average of 72%. There is therefore some spare capacity in the pool stock.

8.327 The Dolphin Centre is however estimated to be uncomfortably full at peak times (more than 70% of capacity used), with 91% of capacity used. Darlington Education Village is estimated to be 100% utilised at peak times and Longfield Academy is 81% utilised. With growth these pressures will increase.

Summary Supply

8.328 The total water space in Darlington is 1,669 sqm of water. When scaled against the amount available during the weekly peak period, this is equivalent to 1,213 sqm of water. Therefore, 27% of the total water space in the Borough is unavailable for community use.

8.329 The swimming pool stock is ageing. The average age of all the sites is 37 years and the only public leisure centre is 43 years old. However, there is a good track record of modernisation, with five of the six sites having been refurbished, including The Dolphin Centre in 2023. This must continue to maintain the supply and demand balance.

8.330 The resident population generates demand for 7,059 visits in the weekly peak period, which is below the available capacity of 10,618 visits. The water space required to meet Darlington's demand comfortably is 1,161 sqm of water, which is below the Borough's available supply of 1,213 sqm of water.

8.331 97% of the demand for swimming pools from Darlington residents is met. This is the highest proportion in the study area, and higher than both the regional and national averages of 93%.

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8.332 A very high proportion of Darlington's demand is met within the Borough, at 90%. This proportion is the highest in the study area. There is a close correlation between the swimming pool locations and areas of highest demand.

8.333 Unmet demand totals 36 sqm of water with a comfort factor included. Residents who are too far from a swimming pool account for 98% of this. Unmet demand due to lack of swimming pool capacity equates to less than 1 sqm of water.

8.334 The Dolphin Centre is estimated to be uncomfortably full at peak times, with 91% of capacity used. Darlington Education Village is estimated to be 100% utilised at peak times and Longfield Academy is 81% utilised.

8.335 Darlington has 16 sqm of water per 1,000 population, which is the highest provision in the study area. It is higher than the regional average of 12 sqm of water per 1,000 population and the national average of 11 sqm of water.

8.336 Overall therefore Darlington's demand for swimming pools is met, but the Borough is very dependent on The Dolphin Centre to achieve this outcome. The pool site can accommodate all swimming activities in a recently refurbished site. There is a good correlation between supply and demand. Demand is highest in the town centre and north of the town centre. This area contains four of the six sites. Demand is low outside these areas and insufficient to support further provision of swimming pools to improve access for residents.

8.337 While supply is greater than demand across the Borough, the offer provided by The Dolphin Centre as the one public leisure centre, which is accessible to all residents, means it is uncomfortably full at peak times. It is also located in an area of 10% highest deprivation, which increases its importance as a centre accessible to all residents.

8.338 There may be scope to increase the availability and capacity of the eight-lane pool at peak times, and this should be explored.

8.339 The three educational swimming pools are small in scale and provide for a more limited range of activities, collectively they meet 1,950 visits in the weekly peak period. This is 26% of the used capacity of Darlington's swimming pools at peak times. Their access for community use is therefore important and should be protected and invested in. Darlington Education Village is the most important site because it is the only educational pool that is 25m in length. Potential changes in management arrangements may provide opportunity to increase usage, similarly Longfield are committed to exploring greater access. There is therefore scope to increase availability and capacity at peak times, which will require investment.

Demand

Participation Trends

8.340 Swimming provides cradle to grave participation opportunities for all age groups. Swimming is one of the most effective ways to burn calories: 30 minutes exercising in the water is worth 45 minutes of the same activity on land. Regular swimming can lower stress levels, reduce anxiety and depression and improve your sleep patterns. Swimming improves heart health, lowers blood pressure, improves lung capacity, increases bone strength and reduces joint pain as it is a low impact sport. Regular swimming can help to reduce long-term health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes by up to 40 per cent.

8.341 Swimming remains one of the most popular activities;

- In the last 12 months, 12.5 million adults (26.9 per cent of the nation) went swimming – 6.8 million women and 5.6 million men

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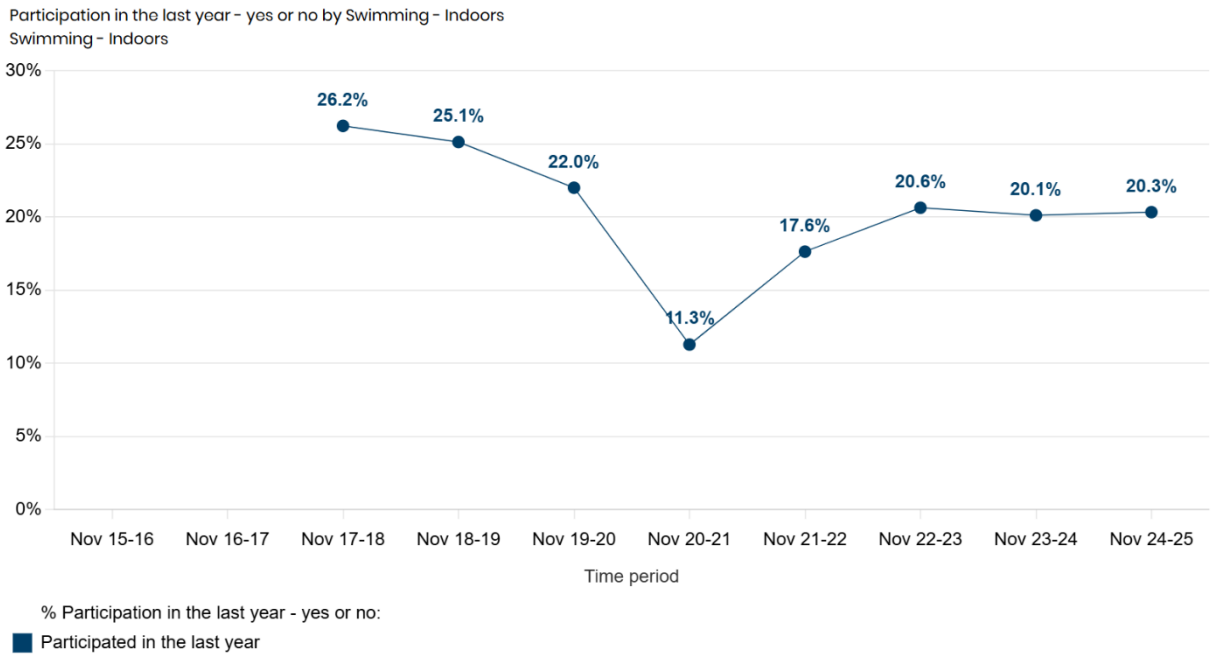
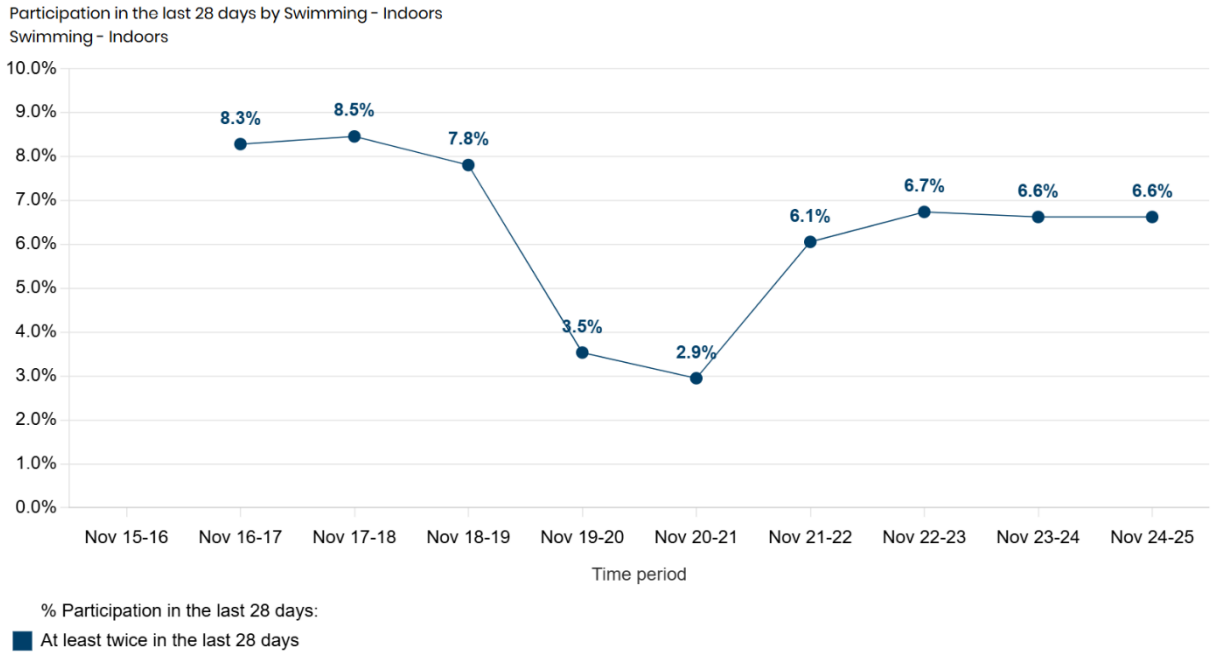
- When focusing on those who swim more frequently, 4.2 million adults swim at least twice a month (9 per cent of the population)
- 2.35m women swim at least twice a month (9.9 per cent of the female population)
- 6.81 million people swim in open water and in outdoor pools
- While 6.81 million swim outdoors, 2.45 million prefer to swim in open water (lakes, lochs, rivers and seas), 2.44 million choose to swim in outdoor pools and an additional 1.92 million enjoy swimming both in open water and outdoor pools
- 25.8 per cent of children aged 5-16 years old swam in the last week. That's 1.92 million young people
- 1.77 million children learn to swim on the Swim England Learn to Swim Programme.

Swimming pools and leisure centres play a critical role in improving the nation's health, reducing pressure on the NHS, supporting local economies and acting as much-loved community hubs.

8.342 The latest Active Lives data set out in chart 10.1 and 10.2 illustrate how swimming participation has recovered post COVID.


Participation in the last year - yes or no by Swimming - Indoors
Swimming - Indoors
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
26.2%
25.1%
22.0%
11.3%
17.6%
20.6%
20.1%
20.3%
Nov 15-16
Nov 16-17
Nov 17-18
Nov 18-19
Nov 19-20
Nov 20-21
Nov 21-22
Nov 22-23
Nov 23-24
Nov 24-25
Time period
% Participation in the last year - yes or no:
Participated in the last year


Participation in the last 28 days by Swimming - Indoors
Swimming - Indoors
10.0%
9.0%
8.0%
7.0%
6.0%
5.0%
4.0%
3.0%
2.0%
1.0%
0.0%
8.3%
8.5%
7.8%
3.5%
2.9%
6.1%
6.7%
6.6%
6.6%
Nov 15-16
Nov 16-17
Nov 17-18
Nov 18-19
Nov 19-20
Nov 20-21
Nov 21-22
Nov 22-23
Nov 23-24
Nov 24-25
Time period
% Participation in the last 28 days:
At least twice in the last 28 days

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8.343 Despite this, swimming faces significant challenges. *The State of UK Swimming Industry Report 2024* found that the number of swimming pools is declining, with a 1.8% reduction from 4,351 in 2023 to 4,272 in 2024. This decline is compared to 4,559 pools before the pandemic. Public leisure centres have seen a decrease from 1,646 to 1,613, a 2% drop, with 25 pools closing and only nine opening. In the private sector, pools have also decreased by 2%, from 1,309 to 1,283.

8.344 The report also identifies key challenges for operators, including rising energy and maintenance costs, aging infrastructure, and difficulties in recruiting swimming teachers and lifeguards.

8.345 There are concerns that without targeted support, the loss of water space across the UK will likely continue to accelerate, further impacting public health, wellbeing, and local economies as people struggle to access pools. According to Sport England's latest Active Lives Children and Young People survey for the 2023-24 academic year, 30% of children in Year 7 are unable to swim 25m competently, confidently and proficiently, a statistic that has risen from 27% in 2017-18.

8.346 People value their swimming pools, with three quarters of children saying they want to swim more and 91% of children stating they either 'love' or 'like' swimming.

8.347 Investing in swimming pools is an investment in the health and prosperity of the nation. In recognition of the challenging financial situation facing the nation, key organisations are encouraging the Government to channel alternative sources of funding to deliver the investment needed into the nation's swimming pools and leisure centres to ensure a sustainable network of facilities for the future.

8.348 In Darlington the Dolphin Centre remains critical to deliver the benefits of swimming and continued investment is therefore vital. Support of the education sector, will be equally critical to maintain the supply and demand balance and ensure residents can continue to enjoy the wide ranging benefits of swimming.

NGB and Club Consultation

Swim England

8.349 Swim England is the recognised national governing body for swimming in England. They help people learn how to swim, enjoy the water safely, and compete in all our sports. Under the banner One Swim England the vision is of a nation swimming and we strive to inspire everyone to enjoy the water in the way that suits them. The commitment of Swim England is to lead and serve an aquatics community to enable safe, enjoyable and successful experiences.

8.350 Consultation with Swim England revealed the following;

- There are two key swimming clubs; Darlington SC (223 members) and Darlington Dolphins Masters (56 members)
- The Borough as a whole shows its water provision to be a deficit of 570 m² against the Swim England recommended 12m² per 1000 population
- Sport England consider the observations above highlights the need to consider future facility needs in Darlington to meet the recommended level of water provision
- Future water provision should look to have open community access, making the water space even more accessible to the local population.

This analysis only considers the Dolphin Centre and does not consider the education or private sector provision. In recognition of this Swim England went on to comment;

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- The pool at the Dolphin centre in Darlington is pretty good, it was refurbished fairly recently. It has a diving pool and a learner pool as well as a splash pad, slide and 25m pool (8 lanes I think) and both the swimming / diving and masters clubs train there

- There are also a number of school pools which the swimming club often access; Hummersknott Academy and Darlington Education Village. There are also some small pools in the leisure clubs which are used by private swim schools / water babies.

These additional comments recognise the importance of the Dolphin and the wider network and how this would make good the identified deficit.

Darlington Swimming Club

8.351 Darlington Swimming Club are a competitive Swimming club with 110 members who train and compete from level 4 Galas all the way to Level 1 National competitions. The club continues to grow and remains financially stable. They have purchased a lot of training equipment over the last 5 years and the next investment will be a new timing system to operate a gala more efficiently. The club aim to make swimming fun for a members and encourage them to fulfil their potential in the pool. They are introducing Long Course training in Sunderland once a month.

8.352 The Dolphin Centre is the main club venue, they also use Darlington Educational Village and Longfield Pool. The club consider the Dolphin Centre to be an excellent pool with great facilities, Longfield has great facilities but is limited as it is a smaller 20m pool. The Education Village is a good pool with less training equipment and less reliable as there are often closures. The club adapt hours to the pool time available. Some swimmers at the highest level leave Darlington as other clubs can offer more pool time.

8.353 The Dolphin Centre is the main pool and the club feel they have everything they need. They would like to renew gala timing equipment but overall, they feel they have a great service and relationship with the staff, which make it a great place to provide training. The club would like to work with the centre to bring competition swimming to Darlington, one potential negative in this context is the lack of a spectator area.

Darlington Tri Club

8.354 The Tri-club also use the Dolphin Centre, which they are very happy with, however there are issues in terms of access.

8.355 The club preference is for swimming training to be at the Dolphin Centre as it is a central location, at present they have a morning slot for training, which is not ideal for members and coaches. They need a better evening slot at the Dolphin Centre to enable them to grow.

8.356 Due to lack of access to Dolphin Centre, the club also use the Darlington Education Village. The pool is viewed as good, very clean and good quality, but the water is too hot and not ideal for triathlon training. The other pools at Hummersknott and Longfield are also not ideal as they are smaller pools and do not ideally work for training. The price of the Education Village is also prohibitive.

8.357 The club believe costs and programming are the key issues for swimming and challenges for the club. The club view is that there is not a shortage of pools, it is just the programming of the pools that needs to be adjusted to better suit their needs and ideally better access to the Dolphin.

Impact of Growth

8.358 The draft Local Plan review sets out a series of housing growth scenarios. It reports that housing will be delivered to meet a minimum requirement of 446 net additional dwellings over the plan period from 2025 to 2042 (which represents a slight reduction on the adopted plan). This results in a total net minimum requirement of 7582 dwellings. The adopted Local Plan, as well as the Local Plan Review note that a large proportion of growth will focus on the existing main urban core of Darlington via sites within the main urban area and strategic extensions, as well as in neighbourhood areas.

8.359 The Plan provides detail on the proposed growth in specific neighbourhoods. Those with anticipated growth above 500 dwellings are;

- Middleton St George 742 houses
- Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent (1405 houses).

8.360 The adopted local plan also proposed significant growth in Hurworth (816 houses, adjusted to 364 in the Local Plan Review). Strategic extensions will be focused to the north east and west of the main urban area, with smaller scale extensions also proposed around the main urban fringe. The Local Plan Review suggests that 3,266 new dwellings will be delivered up to 2035 (the period covered by this strategy).

8.361 The Local Plan Review (now out for consultation) suggests that the following sites will accommodate greater than 400 dwellings up to 2036;

- West Park Garden Village (538). 90 additional dwellings also delivered on West Park Garden Village North up to 2036
- Burtree Garden Village (1170) 360 of which delivered after 2036
- Consicliffe Park South (475 total), 60 delivered after 2036
- Greater Faverdale (750), 1250 after 2036
- Coniscliffe Park North (930 total), 360 delivered after 2036
- Skerningham (1950), 900 of which are after 2036

8.362 The above represent a similar growth strategy to that set out in the current adopted Local Plan. The strategy document will consider the specific impact of the above key developments in order to provide guidance as to how decisions should be made to ensure that the needs arising from the new developments are addressed.

8.363 Growth generated by new housing development will add further pressures and forecasts of the adequacy of provision to meet future demand confirm that increased capacity will be necessary. This strategy seeks to ensure that all new development contributes to providing the increased capacity that is necessary.

8.364 There is an evidence base to support continued investment in the swimming pool network and application of the Sport England Sports Facility Calculator (SFC) cost findings, to accommodate any requirements to invest in swimming pools to accommodate the increased usage will be applicable at the time any major developments come forward.

8.365 So, growth will impact on swimming pool needs in terms of the existing supply, which will become busier. Investment should focus on the existing network not providing additional provision.

8.366 To do this, this Strategy and Action Plan promotes the use of the Sport England Playing Pitch Calculator (PPC) and Sports Facility Calculator (SFC) to assess the impact of each specific new

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development. This approach is also reflected in draft policy in the emerging Local Plan Review. The Strategy and Action Plan sets out how this will be applied.

Demand Summary

8.367 Overall therefore Darlington's demand for swimming pools is met, but the Borough is very dependent on The Dolphin Centre to achieve this outcome. There is a good correlation between supply and demand. Demand is highest in the town centre and north of the town centre. This area contains four of the six sites. Demand is low outside these areas and insufficient to support further provision of swimming pools to improve access for residents.

8.368 However the Dolphin Centre is estimated to be uncomfortably full at peak times (more than 70% of capacity used), with 91% of capacity used. Darlington Education Village is estimated to be 100% utilised at peak times and Longfield Academy is 81% utilised. With growth these pressures will increase.

8.369 Swimming pools and leisure centres play a critical role in improving the nation's health, reducing pressure on the NHS, supporting local economies and acting as much-loved community hubs.

8.370 Despite this, swimming faces significant challenges. The State of UK Swimming Industry Report 2024 found that the number of swimming pools is declining, with a 1.8% reduction from 4,351 in 2023 to 4,272 in 2024. This decline is compared to 4,559 pools before the pandemic. Public leisure centres have seen a decrease from 1,646 to 1,613, a 2% drop, with 25 pools closing and only nine opening. In the private sector, pools have also decreased by 2%, from 1,309 to 1,283.

8.371 The report also identifies key challenges for operators, including rising energy and maintenance costs, aging infrastructure, and difficulties in recruiting swimming teachers and lifeguards.

8.372 Investing in swimming pools is an investment in the health and prosperity of the nation. In recognition of the challenging financial situation facing the nation, key organisations are encouraging the Government to channel alternative sources of funding to deliver the investment needed into the nation's swimming pools and leisure centres to ensure a sustainable network of facilities for the future.

8.373 In Darlington the Dolphin Centre remains critical to deliver the benefits of swimming and continued investment is therefore vital. Support of the education sector, will be equally critical to maintain the supply and demand balance and ensure residents can continue to enjoy the wide ranging benefits of swimming, as growth puts increasing pressure on the swimming pool network.

8.374 Swimming therefore provides cradle to grave participation opportunities for all age groups. The assessment provides an indication that the main swimming pools are already full and in need of investment to meet future needs. Growth will therefore impact on swimming needs both in terms of the existing supply, which will become busier.

8.375 There is therefore an evidence base to support continued investment in the sports halls network and application of the Sport England Sports Facility Calculator (SFC) cost findings, to accommodate any requirements to invest is swimming pools halls to accommodate the increased usage will be applicable at the time any major developments come forward.

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Summary – Key Issues for Swimming

Introduction

8.376 The ANOG approach requires a drawing together of the key issues which have arisen from the assessment, these then form the options, which are set out in the Strategy and Action Plan.

8.377 The key issues for swimming that need to be considered as part of the strategy development are therefore summarised in the table overleaf.

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Summary – Key Issues for Swimming in Darlington

Summary	Assessment Findings	Specific Facility Issues
Supply	• There are eight swimming pools across six sites in Darlington that are available for community use. Wyvern school pool has permanently closed since the last strategy • Darlington has 16 sqm of water per 1,000 population, which is higher than the regional average of 12 sqm of water per 1,000 population and the national average of 11 sqm of water • The total water space in Darlington is 1,669 sqm of water. When scaled against the amount available during the weekly peak period, this is equivalent to 1,213 sqm of water. Therefore, 27% of the total water space in the Borough is unavailable for community use • The swimming pool stock is however ageing. The average age of all the sites is 37 years and the only public leisure centre is 43 years old. However, there is a good track record of modernisation, with five of the six sites having been refurbished, including The Dolphin Centre in 2023 • There is one public leisure centre in Darlington, The Dolphin Centre, which is operated in-house by the Council. It is the largest swimming pool site in the Borough and the only site with more than one pool • The educational sector is the largest provider in terms of sites, with three of the six sites. The three educational pool sites in the Borough are all single pools. Darlington Education Village is operated in-house by the school. It is available for hire to swimming clubs and also operates a learn-to-swim school. Hummersknott Academy is operated in-house but also uses SchoolHire, an external online platform, for advertising and booking its facilities. The pool is available for community hire and operates a learn-to-swim school through two external providers. Longfield Academy is operated via a PFI contract and is available to residents through membership for recreational and fitness swimming activities. The school also operates a learn-to-swim programme through an external provider • Pay and play recreational swimming sessions at the education sites is limited, access is focussed on organised club use or swimming lessons	• The swimming pool stock is ageing. The average age of all the sites is 37 years and the only public leisure centre is 43 years old. • Public swimming is more limited given the management and access policies outwith the Dolphin Centre, so whilst supply is good and in excess of demand there are management and access challenges in ensuring public accessibility to the available stock.

	• There are two commercial providers – both are single-pool sites. Rockliffe Hall swimming pool is available for community use for residents who hold a spa or resort membership. Bannatyne Health Club is available for community use through membership. It provides for recreational swimming and also operates a learn-to-swim school on a one-to-one or one-to-two basis.	
Demand	• The resident population generates demand for 7,059 visits in the weekly peak period, which is below the available capacity of 10,618 visits. The water space required to meet Darlington's demand comfortably is 1,161 sqm of water, which is below the Borough's available supply of 1,213 sqm of water. • In 2025, 97% of the demand for swimming pools from Darlington residents is met. This is the highest proportion in the study area, and higher than both the regional and national averages of 93% • A very high proportion of Darlington's demand is met within the Borough, at 90%. This proportion is the highest in the study area. There is a close correlation between the swimming pool locations and areas of highest demand • Unmet demand totals 36 sqm of water with a comfort factor included. Residents who are too far from a swimming pool account for 98% of this. Unmet demand due to lack of swimming pool capacity equates to less than 1 sqm of water • The Dolphin Centre is estimated to be uncomfortably full at peak times, with 91% of capacity used. Darlington Education Village is estimated to be 100% utilised at peak times and Longfield Academy is 81% utilised.	• The key element to be taken from this report is that Darlington's demand for swimming pools can be met, and that supply exceeds demand. Nearly all the satisfied demand is met within the Borough. • The Dolphin Centre provides half the available capacity in the weekly peak period and accommodates all swimming activities. The distribution of demand and the attractiveness of the centre means it is estimated to be uncomfortably full at peak times (more than 70% of capacity used). • There is a very small amount of unmet demand that is located too far from a swimming pool. Unmet demand because of a lack of swimming pool capacity is negligible • Overall, Darlington's demand for swimming pools is met, but the Borough is very dependent on The Dolphin Centre to achieve this outcome. The pool site can accommodate all swimming activities in a recently refurbished site • There is a good correlation between supply and demand. Demand is highest in the town centre and north of the town centre. This area contains four of the six sites. Demand is low outside these areas and insufficient to support further provision of swimming pools to improve access for residents.
Key Issues for Strategy to	• The key element to be taken from this report is that Darlington's demand for swimming pools can be met, and that supply exceeds demand. Nearly all the satisfied demand is met within the Borough • The Dolphin Centre provides half the available capacity in the weekly peak period and accommodates all swimming activities. The distribution of	

address	demand and the attractiveness of the centre means it is estimated to be uncomfortably full at peak times (more than 70% of capacity used). • 0.4 There is a very small amount of unmet demand that is located too far from a swimming pool. Unmet demand because of a lack of swimming pool capacity is negligible • Overall, Darlington's demand for swimming pools is met, but the Borough is very dependent on The Dolphin Centre to achieve this outcome. The pool site can accommodate all swimming activities in a recently refurbished site. • There is a good correlation between supply and demand. Demand is highest in the town centre and north of the town centre. This area contains four of the six sites. Demand is low outside these areas and insufficient to support further provision of swimming pools to improve access for residents • While supply is greater than demand across the Borough, the offer provided by The Dolphin Centre as the one public leisure centre, which is accessible to all residents, means it is uncomfortably full at peak times. It is also located in an area of 10% highest deprivation, which increases its importance as a centre accessible to all residents • These is scope to increase the availability and capacity of the eight-lane pool at peak times. This should be implemented to create a better balance between supply and demand • While the three educational swimming pools are small in scale and provide for a more limited range of activities, collectively they meet 1,950 visits in the weekly peak period. This is 26% of the used capacity of Darlington's swimming pools at peak times. Their access for community use should be protected • There is therefore a need to protect all existing provision. Continue to invest in the Dolphin Centre. Education based provision should be protected. Seek to invest in the school pool network to facilitate greater community use and access • The assessment provides an indication that the main swimming pools are already full and in need of investment to meet future needs. Growth will therefore impact on swimming needs both in terms of the existing supply, which will become busier • Supply and demand therefore clearly illustrates that there will be impacts of the projected growth that will require financial contributions. Investment should therefore be sought investment to improve the quality and capacity at the key swimming pool sites in line with the application of Sport England's Sports Facility Calculator tool • Any new provision should clearly meet identified gaps, following consideration of supply and demand balance at the time • Contributions from developments should be sought in the main to maintain and enhance the existing swimming pool stock, in terms of upgrading and refurbishment. Any future swimming pool investment should set out a need based on sports development and NGB requirements.

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