Darlington Playing Pitch Strategy Draft

Section 1: Assessment report and action plan headlines

	Assessment Report Headline	Strategy & Action Plan Headline
Football	Participation has grown significantly, particularly in youth and girls' football. There is a current shortage of 3G provision and increasing pressure on youth and 9v9 pitches.	Protect all existing facilities, provide at least **3 additional 3G AGPs**, improve pitch quality and ancillary facilities, and create more capacity for youth football growth.
Rugby Union	Rising participation, especially female rugby. Poor pitch quality, overplay, inadequate changing provision and lack of WR-compliant 3G training facilities.	Improve pitch quality and drainage, enhance maintenance, provide suitable training facilities (including 3G solutions), and increase capacity to meet current and future demand.
Cricket	Strong growth in junior and women's cricket is placing pressure on facilities. Limited spare capacity and growing demand cannot be met by existing provision.	Secure existing grounds, improve pitch quality and training facilities, address capacity constraints, and plan for at least one additional cricket pitch to accommodate growth.
Hockey	One good quality sand-based AGP currently meets demand, but the borough is reliant on a single facility.	Protect the Carmel College pitch, maintain its sand-based surface, and begin planning for future resurfacing and replacement funding.
Tennis & Padel	Overall provision is sufficient, but public courts are poor quality and clubs are near capacity. Indoor/covered tennis is a key gap.	Improve park courts, increase use of school facilities, support club expansion through floodlighting, and prioritise covered/indoor tennis provision.
Bowls	Participation is static or declining. Infrastructure is generally adequate, but	No new greens required. Focus on maintenance, pavilion improvements, club sustainability and member recruitment.

	sustainability and recruitment are concerns at some clubs.	
Athletics	Eastbourne provides a good quality athletics facility, but there are opportunities to improve supporting infrastructure and participation growth.	Protect the Eastbourne track, maintain accreditation, improve supporting facilities and continue investment in athletics provision.
Indoor Sports Halls	Quantity is generally sufficient, but access, ageing facilities and school dependency are key concerns. The Dolphin Centre remains critical to provision.	Protect existing stock, invest in refurbishment and improve community access, particularly where facilities are school based.
Swimming Pools	Overall supply is adequate but heavily reliant on the Dolphin Centre and education sites. Any pool closure would have a significant impact.	Maintain and protect the existing pool network, continue investment in ageing facilities and maximise programme efficiency. A recent Facilities Planning model survey carried out by Sport England in 2025 alongside the new PPS highlighted the importance of maintaining and improving the Dolphin Centre. This site has the largest capacity in the Borough and meets 4,888 visits in the weekly peak period, which is 65% of the total number of visits met in Darlington per week in the peak period.

Section 2: Borough wide strategic headlines

Headlines
1. Growth in participation is being driven by women, girls and young people.
2. Football, rugby and cricket face the greatest capacity pressures.
3. Facility quality remains as important as facility quantity. Poor drainage, maintenance and ancillary provision reduce capacity across multiple sports.
4. 3G provision is the biggest strategic infrastructure gap, particularly for football and rugby.
5. Future housing growth will place further pressure on facilities unless additional capacity is created.
6. Protecting existing facilities and securing external funding are core priorities across all sports

Section 3: Major Priority Investment

Looking across all sports, the strategy identifies a relatively small number of major priority investments that would have the biggest impact on participation, capacity and long-term sustainability.

Priority 1: Additional 3G Artificial Grass Pitches (Highest Borough-Wide Priority)
Why?
Football currently has a deficit of 2-3 3G pitches.
Rugby clubs lack access to WR-compliant training facilities.
Existing AGPs are heavily utilised.
Demand continues to grow, particularly in youth and women's sport.
Required Improvements
Deliver at least 3 additional 3G AGPs.
Ensure at least one solution supports rugby training requirements.
Increase match and training capacity across football and rugby.

Priority 2: Football Hub Site Improvements
Why?
Several major football sites are operating under significant pressure.
Priority Sites
St Aidan's Academy
Teesside Airport
Blackwell Meadows
Priory Hurworth House
Darlington RA
Staindrop Road
Required Improvements
Drainage improvements
Pitch reconstruction and maintenance
Changing facilities
Parking improvements
Better utilisation of Carmel College and Wyvern Academy grass pitches.

Priority 3: Rugby Union Infrastructure
Why?
Both rugby clubs experience significant overplay and poor pitch quality.
Priority Sites
Darlington RFC
Darlington Mowden Park

Required Improvements
Drainage upgrades
Improved maintenance regimes
Floodlighting improvements
Modern changing accommodation
Additional training capacity (including AGP solutions).

Priority 4: Cricket Capacity and Training Facilities

Why?
There is now no spare cricket capacity at peak times and female participation is growing rapidly.
Priority Sites
Haughton CC
Darlington RA
Middleton St George CC
Cockerton CC
Darlington CC
Rockcliffe Park
Required Improvements
Pitch quality improvements
Practice net provision
Pavilion extensions and upgrades
Secure long-term lease at Haughton CC
Creation of additional cricket capacity across the borough.

Priority 5: Indoor / Covered Tennis Centre

Why?
This is identified as a strategic gap in Darlington.
Required Improvements
Develop covered or indoor tennis provision.
Increase floodlighting at club sites.
Upgrade public park courts.
Improve school court accessibility.

Priority 6: Athletics Investment at Eastbourne

Why?
Eastbourne is the borough's sole synthetic athletics track and serves the whole area.
Required Improvements
Protect the facility.
Continue lifecycle investment.
Improve supporting infrastructure and equipment.

Maintain competition accreditation

Priority 7: Swimming Pool and Indoor Leisure Investment
Why?
The Dolphin Centre remains the cornerstone of indoor leisure provision.
Required Improvements
Continue investment in ageing pool infrastructure.
Protect existing swimming water space.
Improve indoor sports hall stock and accessibility.
Maintain service continuity, given reliance on educational facilities.

Priority 8: Hockey Pitch Lifecycle Replacement
Why?
Darlington relies on a single hockey facility.
Priority Site
Carmel College AGP
Required Improvements
Planned resurfacing fund.
Long-term replacement programme.
Protection of the pitch for hockey use only.

Priority 9: Bowls Facility Sustainability
Why?
Facilities are generally adequate, but quality and sustainability need addressing.
Required Improvements
Bowling green maintenance programmes.
Pavilion improvements.
Volunteer support and club development initiatives.
Winter provision at indoor facilities

Summary: Top Five Capital Priorities
The strongest priorities emerging from the strategy are:
1. New 3G AGPs (Football & Rugby)
2. Football Hub Site Enhancements
3. Rugby Pitch, Drainage and Ancillary Improvements
4. Cricket Capacity Expansion and Training Facilities
5. Indoor/Covered Tennis Development

Section 4: Investment Priority Sites

These are the investments most directly linked to addressing current shortages, accommodating future housing growth and supporting the continued growth of participation across Darlington.

1. Carmel College Hockey Pitch

Issues

- Single hockey facility serving the borough.
- Surface likely to approach end of life during the strategy period.

Required Improvements

- Resurfacing fund.
- Long-term replacement planning.

2. Cockerton Cricket Club

Required Improvements

- Drainage improvements.
- Pavilion extension.
- Improved maintenance.
- Practice provision.

3. Darlington RFC/Blackwell Meadows

Urgency: Very High

Issues

- Poor pitch quality for Rugby
- Significant overplay.
- Limited floodlighting.
- Lack of suitable training facilities.
- Changing facilities require improvement. Ongoing uncertainty around long term growth requirements linked to Darlington FC and site is an important football hub

Priority Works

- Drainage improvements.
- Pitch reconstruction and maintenance.
- Important Football hub
- Additional floodlighting.
- AGP/training provision
- Modernised changing accommodation for both football and rugby

4. Darlington Indoor Bowls Club (Morrison Centre)

Issues

- At full capacity in the winter.
- Remains a vital resource even in the summer, when some players remain indoors rather than moving to the outdoor greens

Required Improvements

- Investment is required into the existing bowls infrastructure to ensure that sites remain sustainable and that future demand can be accommodated.

5. Darlington Mowden Park RFC

Urgency: Very High

Issues

- Poor quality outer pitches.
- Drainage problems.
- Capacity pressures.
- Growing female and junior participation.

Priority Works

- Pitch improvements.
- Drainage.
- Additional training capacity.
- Improved ancillary facilities

6. Darlington Railway Athletic (Football & Cricket)

Issues

- Football ancillary provision concerns.
- Cricket pitch quality affecting capacity.
- Growing participation.

Required Improvements

- Cricket pitch maintenance equipment.
- Pavilion improvements.
- Football changing improvements.
- Practice nets.
- Potential new AGP requirements

7. Dolphin Centre

Issues

- Critical county-wide leisure asset.
- Ongoing upgrades already recognised in the strategy.

Required Improvements

- Continued investment in pools and indoor sports infrastructure. A recent Facility Planning Model survey highlighted the importance of maintaining and improving the Dolphin Centre given the importance of supply and demand for both swimming and hall availability.

8. Eastbourne Sports Complex

Strategic Importance: Borough-wide football, athletics and leisure hub.

Key Improvements Required

- Additional 3G capacity to help address the borough-wide AGP shortfall.
- Continued investment in the athletics track and supporting infrastructure.
- Ongoing maintenance and lifecycle replacement planning.

9. Haughton Cricket Club

Issues

- Overplay.
- Annual lease only.
- Pavilion upgrades required.
- Training facilities lacking.

Required Improvements

- Secure long-term tenure.
- Pavilion improvements.
- Practice nets.
- Pitch quality improvements.

10. Middleton St George Cricket Club

Required Improvements

- Maintenance upgrades.
- Non-turf practice facilities.
- Increased capacity.

11. Priory Hurworth House

Issues

- Heavy usage and pressure from large numbers of teams.
- Ancillary provision identified as an issue.

Required Improvements

- Pitch quality improvements.
- Changing and support facilities.

12. Rockcliffe Park Cricket Club

Required Improvements

- Pavilion expansion.
- Sustainability works.
- Additional training facilities.

3. St Aidan's Academy Football Hub

Urgency: High

Issues

- Critical pitch quality concerns affecting one of the borough's larger football bases.
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Priority Works

- Pitch quality improvements.
- Drainage and maintenance investment.
- Continued Football Foundation support.

14. Staindrop Road Playing Fields

Issues

- Pitches underutilised due to parking constraints.

Required Improvements

- Parking infrastructure.
- Site accessibility enhancements.

15. Teesside Airport Football Site

Urgency: High

Issues

- Significant quality concerns affecting capacity.

Priority Works

- Drainage.
- Surface improvements.
- Improved maintenance regimes.