

DECISION TAKER: Councillor Kathleen Becker, Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities

REPORT TITLE: WINCHESTER SPORTS FACILITY ASSESSMENT AND PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY 2025-2040

20 MARCH 2026

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WARD(S): ALL

PURPOSE

This report seeks approval for a Sports Facility Assessment and Playing Pitch Strategy (referred to in the report as 'the PPS') which has been produced to inform decision making about the provision of sports facilities for public use across the district.

The purpose of the PPS is to:

- Provide robust evidence on the current and future supply and demand of all outdoor sports pitches within Winchester district.
- Provide a clear strategic framework for the maintenance and improvement of existing outdoor sports pitches and ancillary facilities.
- Help guide investment, funding bids, planning applications and decision making.
- Provide detail and inform the Local Plan, including the next review.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That the Winchester Sports Facility Assessment and Playing Pitch Strategy 2025-2040, shown at appendix 1, be adopted.

IMPLICATIONS:

1 COUNCIL PLAN OUTCOME

1.1 Greener Faster

1.2 The PPS seeks to protect grass pitches and to ensure that built sports facilities are fit-for-purpose, including adaptation to improve energy efficiency.

1.3 Thriving Places

1.4 The PPS helps to ensure the provision of attractive, clean public spaces and facilities across the district and (where appropriate) that these are within 20 minutes of people's homes.

1.5 Healthy Communities

1.6 The PPS plays a significant role in delivering the Healthy Communities objectives within the Council Plan. It secures sporting infrastructure by underpinning the Local Plan with robust evidence on the current and future supply and demand of all outdoor sports pitches within the district and ensures this evidence is capable of being scrutinised through examination and meets the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework.

1.7 This ensures increased access to attractive and well-maintained facilities and green spaces, increased opportunity for participation in physical activity for all ages and abilities, and improved health and wellbeing.

1.8 Good Homes for All

1.9 N/A

1.10 Efficient and Effective

1.11 The PPS seeks to maximise the use of all facilities across the district, including community use of facilities owned by educational establishments and the military that are often under-utilised.

1.12 Listening and Learning

1.13 The evidence base for the PPS is informed by extensive engagement with stakeholders from across the district, in particular sports clubs and operators of sports facilities.

2 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

2.1 The PPS will guide investment decisions for the next 15 years. Most of the actions/outcomes contained in the PPS have no immediate budget implications with many opportunities to be explored by, or in partnership with, key stakeholders.

- 2.2 There are a handful of actions (pages 116-121 of the PPS) that are the direct responsibility of the council. A number of these are already completed, or in progress with funding secured. The others generally require further research or exploration, following which any proposal would be brought forward through the normal project planning and decision-making process. External funding sources will be sought where possible, or existing resources applied if available.
- 2.3 The PPS provides evidence of the current demand and supply of facilities in an area, which is required for bids for external funding for new or improved facilities, such as that available from Sport England and national governing bodies (NGBs).

3 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 There are no legal implications directly associated with this report. Any legal implications directly associated with projects that emerge from the PPS will, as appropriate, be subject of separate reports to Cabinet where required. Any procurement associated with the PPS would be subject to relevant legislation and the council's Constitution (Contract Procedural Rules).

4 CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 4.1 The PPS has been overseen by a steering group comprising Winchester City Council, Sport England, the Football Foundation, Hampshire Football Association, England and Wales Cricket Board, the Hampshire Cricket Board, Rugby Football Union and England Hockey. All relevant NGBs were asked to contribute to the draft strategy and 29 different NGBs engaged in the process. The PPS has satisfied the requirements of Sport England and NGBs.
- 4.2 Sports clubs, parish councils and other facility operators were consulted through online surveys to gather their views on the facilities available within the district and their future needs. These responses were supplemented with site visits in many cases and have resulted in a strong evidence base to underpin the PPS. Full details of this consultation are shown in appendix 6 to the PPS but can be summarised as follows:
- (i) Consultation with 21 facility providers
 - (ii) Consultation with 32 town and parish councils
 - (iii) Consultation with 60 clubs across 22 different sports
- 4.3 The PPS and its findings have been discussed at key points during the process with the Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities and the emerging priorities were considered by the Health and Environment Policy Committee at its February 2025 meeting.

5 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 The provision of a suitable number of outdoor sports pitches can have environmental impacts, both positive and occasionally negative. These can relate to facilities ancillary to the pitches themselves, such as changing rooms and car parking. Any new or replacement facility development as a result of the PPS should undergo environment and energy assessments to ensure that the facility mitigates its environmental impact, reduces carbon emissions and is energy efficient. This will be required to meet planning policy requirements where planning permission is needed and to adhere to the council's climate emergency ambitions.
- 5.2 Artificial turf pitches are also proposed in the PPS, as they have a significantly greater capacity than their grassed equivalent. This is in line with national policy from Sport England and NGBs, along with a series of measures around material, design, maintenance and behaviour that minimise the impact of such facilities. The planning process addresses all of these issues and would also provide opportunity to consider any other environmental impacts, for example biodiversity and landscape impact, in line with nature emergency ambitions.

6 PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

- 6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment can be seen at appendix 2 and identifies that the strategy will not directly result in any discrimination. However, it could indirectly, if facilities developed because of the strategy do not take appropriate account of the needs of protected groups. All facility proposals brought forward by the council, or supported by the council, will be required to demonstrate this through an EqIA specific to the project.

7 RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk	Mitigation	Opportunities
<u>Financial Exposure</u> Unplanned or unexpected costs.	Early identification of need in the district allows forward planning.	Opportunity to explore external funding options with PPS as evidence.
<u>Exposure to challenge</u> Evidence deemed to be unsound.	Use of consultants with experience of policy work of this kind. Involvement of Sport England and NGBs provides professional credibility for the findings. Local stakeholders have been involved in the process.	

<p><u>Innovation</u> Traditional ways continued at the expense of new ideas and approaches.</p>	<p>Use of consultants with industry experience. Involvement of Sport England and NGBs brings industry knowledge and good practice.</p>	<p>Most appropriate options might involve both traditional solutions and newer ideas. Document is not prescriptive and leaves flexibility to adapt approaches.</p>
<p><u>Reputation</u> Document deemed to set insufficient expectations. Over reliance or expectation on the role of the council.</p>	<p>Involvement of stakeholders means expectations should be known. Sign off by Sport England and NGBs validates the findings.</p>	<p>Maintain dialogue established with clubs and other stakeholders. Document demonstrates the breadth of provision that already exists.</p>
<p><u>Achievement of outcome</u> Failure to secure provision of facilities in accordance with the strategy.</p>	<p>Share published document with all stakeholders and review progress periodically.</p>	<p>Secure infrastructure or funding through S106 developments for new major developments.</p>
<p><u>Property</u> Unwise, poorly planned or unnecessary property improvements and investment.</p>	<p>Sound evidence base produced by industry experts to inform future property decisions.</p>	<p>Other stakeholders' greater awareness of the needs they might address through their own property portfolios.</p>
<p><u>Community Support</u> Lack of support for the findings.</p>	<p>Comprehensive consultation with clubs and other stakeholders means the findings are informed by community need.</p>	<p>Solid evidence of need to influence other stakeholders to take action.</p>
<p><u>Timescales</u> Document not published on time.</p>	<p>Previous version still provides some policy guidance, albeit dated.</p>	
<p><u>Project capacity</u> Lack of knowledge, experience or time to ensure sound process is followed.</p>	<p>Use of consultants with experience of policy work of this kind.</p>	

<p><u>Local Government Reorganisation</u> Winchester's needs are not recognised and documented.</p>	<p>The PPS ensures there is no vacuum of evidence to support Local Plan policies.</p>	<p>The new unitary authority will be well informed to make the right choices about sporting infrastructure in Winchester.</p>
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8 OTHER KEY ISSUES

Workforce

- 8.1 There is a need to review progress during the life of the document. This requires internal collaboration and to maintain dialogue with key external stakeholders, which will be undertaken by the Community and Wellbeing team.

Property

- 8.2 The assessment will help to inform the facilities mix at sites across the district, in particular at major development sites identified in the Local Plan.

9 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

Background

- 9.1 Following a competitive tendering process, the consultancy Continuum Sport and Leisure was commissioned in 2024 to complete an audit of playing pitches and sports facilities in the district and to prepare a Playing Pitch Strategy and Sports Facility Assessment (PPS) for the period 2025 to 2040 (in line with the emerging Local Plan).
- 9.2 The primary purpose of the PPS is to provide a strategic framework which identifies what provision exists and how this can be improved to meet the needs of existing and future residents across the district. This is achieved by assessing the current levels of provision across the public, private, education, voluntary and commercial sectors and comparing this with current and likely future levels of demand. By using modelling techniques endorsed by Sport England, the PPS presents a supply and demand assessment of playing pitch and other outdoor sports facilities.
- 9.3 The PPS looks at pitch provision in relation to football, rugby, hockey and cricket when played on grass (including artificial grass surfaces).
- 9.4 It also assesses the need for built facilities including swimming pools, sports halls and health/fitness suites. See section 1.5 of the PPS for a full list of facility types.

- 9.5 This document supersedes the previous Playing Pitch Strategy 2018 and Sports Facilities Needs Assessment 2017 and builds on the successful delivery of a number of the priorities and projects highlighted in those documents.

Context

- 9.6 Alongside the need for the council to ensure an up-to-date evidence base within the emerging Local Plan, the purpose of the strategy is to support the council's overarching principles of positively shaping the future of Winchester local authority area as a healthier and more active place. The Local Plan includes policies which seek to ensure the provision of publicly accessible recreational facilities to meet any existing shortfalls and population growth. These facilities may be provided in a number of different ways and by different types of organisations.
- 9.7 Each local authority in the country is encouraged to produce a PPS to inform future decisions regarding the demand and supply of existing and new playing pitches and built sports facilities in their area.

Methodology

- 9.8 The PPS has been prepared in accordance with Sport England's 'Assessing Needs and Opportunities Guidance' (ANOG) and Playing Pitch Strategy Guidance. Recommendations follow the 'Protect, Enhance, Provide' framework, which is a core principle of UK planning policy for sport and physical activity facilities.
- 9.9 The study area is the Winchester district, including the Winchester section of the South Downs National Park, and is split into north and south zones to reflect housing growth patterns.
- 9.10 A variety of consultation methods were used to obtain information about supply and demand from providers of facilities, leagues, clubs, county associations and national/regional governing bodies of sport. Issues identified by clubs returning questionnaires were followed up by telephone or face to face interviews.
- 9.11 All identified outdoor sports facilities were assessed and a quality rating recorded within the audit. These quality ratings were validated by NGBs and used to help estimate the capacity of each facility to accommodate competitive and other play, within the supply and demand assessment.
- 9.12 Future demand was estimated from population projections and housing growth to 2040 by applying national standard formula for participation rates. The propensity for future populations to participate in pitch sports, feedback from teams and National Governing Bodies' specific sports development targets were also considered.

- 9.13 The capacity of each playing pitch was determined, to indicate how many match-equivalent sessions per week it can sustain. This was compared to the number of matches actually taking place and an understanding of spare capacity or overuse was identified. Once capacity was determined on a site-by-site basis, spare capacity was calculated on an area-by-area basis.
- 9.14 Modelling scenarios were then used to look at whether existing provision could cater for unmet, displaced and future demand.

Summary of findings

- 9.15 Football faces acute shortfalls in 3G artificial turf pitches, which results in overuse of grass pitches for training and reduces pitch quality and carrying capacity, leading to cancellations and limiting growth. Some of the shortfall would be met through projects already at planning stage, but more will be required over the strategy period. This was an issue at the time of the last strategy but is becoming a bigger problem over time.
- 9.16 Grass pitch capacity for football is less of a problem, though capacity is insufficient to meet peak-time demand. Planned provision at new major development sites will go a long way to meeting the demand, alongside the artificial turf pitches provision referenced above. Alongside our new PPS, the Football Foundation has recently updated its Local Football Facility Plan for the district which aligns with these findings.
- 9.17 Rugby pitches are overplayed and suffer from poor drainage, especially in the town area. There is a need for additional natural turf pitch capacity, either through new pitches or improvement to existing pitches such as engineered drainage which would increase their capacity to cope with demand. Additional 3G artificial turf pitches could also be produced to a specification that would allow rugby training.
- 9.18 Cricket provision is broadly sufficient at present, though quality improvements are needed to some pitches. Two additional pitches are required over the plan period, and these should be deliverable through the major development sites.
- 9.19 Hockey relies on two sand-dressed artificial turf pitches on education sites with no secure community use, both at capacity, and there will be a need for one more over the plan period. This highlights a wider issue identified in the PPS - that of increasing access to provision that is not currently available to the community, such as at school sites. There is unused capacity which can help meet the demand without investing in new facilities, but it is important that clubs can secure their use of the sites through formal agreement to give them security.
- 9.20 Tennis provision is adequate, but provision of padel courts is below Lawn Tennis Association targets so there is a need for additional padel courts, ideally clustered near population hubs in the city centre and the south of the district.

- 9.21 Indoor facilities generally meet demand. There is an overprovision of swimming pool space, though we need to safeguard access to pool and sports hall facilities at locations such as schools and colleges. There are clubs in the town area that lack sufficient dedicated space and require more bespoke facilities for gymnastics and boxing if they are to grow and continue to meet demand.

Delivering the Strategy

- 9.22 The PPS will assist the council in maintenance and management decisions as well as investment across all its sites. By addressing the identified issues, the current and future sporting and recreational needs of Winchester can be satisfied.
- 9.23 It is important to also note that delivery of the PPS reflects provision beyond that which the council is able to meet and requires stakeholders and partners to be involved in its delivery. This is particularly important in a large, rural district such as Winchester, where parish councils, sports clubs and other providers such as schools and colleges, all play an important role in facility provision. The council will take an enabling role to help support and encourage stakeholders and partners in maintaining and enhancing their provision.
- 9.24 There is a clear planning requirement to ensure that existing playing fields, pitches and ancillary facilities are protected and enhanced, and only in exceptional cases would the loss of playing field land be permitted. This is true even where there is sufficient provision, as there is for most sports across the district. Where possible, additional or improved facilities will be delivered by sports organisations, education establishments and parish/town councils.
- 9.25 Annual monitoring and review will be undertaken with the Steering Group (as detailed in 4.1) to ensure delivery and implementation of the PPS recommendations and actions. It will also ensure the evidence and data remain up to date and that Sport England and the National Government Bodies will consider the PPS, and the information on which it is based, as a reliable source of evidence.

10 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 10.1 The council could decide not to adopt the PPS. This option is not recommended as it would leave a gap in the evidence base which supports Local Plan policies and leave a risk of sporting infrastructure not being provided in association with development. It would also deprive the council of an important tool which can inform future investment and management decisions with respect to sports provision across the district.
- 10.2 The council could alternatively seek additional work to be undertaken on the PPS before adopting. However, the work to date has been comprehensive and in accordance with accepted good practice in the development of such documents. The findings are evidence led and there is little likelihood of

further work leading to different findings. This option is not recommended as delay in adopting the PPS means the previous PPS (completed in 2018) would become more outdated and increase the risk of challenge to planning decisions that involve sports provision.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

Previous Cabinet/Committee Reports or Cabinet Member Decisions:-

Presentation to Health and Environment Policy Committee - 26 February 2025 - Sports Facilities Assessment & Playing Pitch Strategy 2025

CAB3032 – 20 June 2018 - DISTRICT WIDE PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY

Other Background Documents:-

None.

APPENDICES:

1. Winchester Sports Facilities Assessment and Playing Pitch Strategy 2025–2040
2. Equality Impact Assessment