

**ADOPTION OF 2024 PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY AND UPDATE ON LOCAL FOOTBALL FACILITIES PLAN REFRESH**

Report of the Deputy Chief Executive Place and Regeneration

**1.0 MATTER FOR CONSIDERATION**

- 1.1 2024 Playing Pitch Strategy findings.
- 1.2 Adoption of the 2024 Playing Pitch Strategy.
- 1.3 Local Football Facilities Plan refresh.

**2.0 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Playing Pitch Strategies (PPS) summarise the supply (pitch provision) and demand (participation data) of pitches for football, rugby, cricket, hockey and lacrosse and provide a sound basis on which to develop policy and make informed decisions for sports development and investment.
- 2.3 The PPS is considered an integral component of our Local Plan, helping to inform strategic need within the planned period.
- 2.4 The PPS is also used to inform the priorities of the boroughs Local Football Facilities Plan (LFFP), which is a crucial resource considered by the Football Foundation (FF) when making substantial grant decisions.
- 2.5 Sport England (SE) recommends that PPS's are undertaken roughly every five years to ensure that any changes to pitch infrastructure, sports participation, political boundaries and housing developments are captured. Stockport's previous PPS was undertaken in 2017.
- 2.6 Since then, several significant factors have occurred, most notably Covid-19, the Council's decision to withdraw from the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF), some changes to ward boundaries and known, substantial, affiliation growth in certain sports.
- 2.7 The Council therefore commissioned KKP to undertake a full refresh of the PPS and this work has recently reached completion.

**3.0 FINDINGS OF THE 2024 PPS**

- 3.1 Club affiliation data has shown a profound increase in participation across all sport and in Women's & Girls and Youth age-group football in particular. Whilst this is a great achievement, it has none the less presented a challenge regarding pitch capacity.
- 3.2 Demand is being met for hockey and some elements of cricket (Saturday matches). For football, rugby, lacrosse and Sunday cricket there is a shortfall of grass pitches.

- 3.3 There is a significant shortfall of 3G Artificial Grass Pitches (AGP's) of 12. At the time of drafting the Strategy, two live 3G AGP projects were reaching completion, so this figure will reduce to 10.
- 3.4 Although 3G AGP's are recognised as durable, safe, year-round playing surfaces and able to withstand intensive use and all kinds of weather, concerns have been raised about the environmental impact of these pitches, specifically relating to the microplastic rubber infill getting into the ecosystem and the need for greater focus on the end-of-life recycling of pitches.
- 3.5 Sport England, working with relevant partners, are actively exploring alternative artificial pitch systems, more sustainable infill products and increasing recycling capacity available to sports providers nationwide. Examples of this include the Football Foundation's significant investment in its own UK 'test hub' to research alternative infill materials, which is expected to yield results in 2025.

#### **4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS TO REDUCE SHORTFALLS**

- 4.1 Most of the identified grass pitch shortfalls can be met by better utilising current provision, such as through improving surface quality and drainage, installing additional sports lighting, improving ancillary facilities, bringing disused pitches back into use and enabling access to existing unused provision, such as at unavailable school sites.
- 4.2 This means that new grass pitches are not necessarily required, although such a need will increase if other methods of reducing shortfalls are not possible, particularly for cricket. Moreover, new provision may be needed to service any large-scale housing developments of new school builds.
- 4.3 Notwithstanding the above, there is a clear, quantifiable shortfall of 3G AGP provision that can only be rectified through the installation of new facilities. Furthermore, the deficit is large.
- 4.4 The development of 3G AGP's could also help to alleviate grass pitch shortfalls via the transfer of play from overplayed grass pitch sites and facilitate the growth of teams and leagues that use for the provision for their playing formats (e.g., mini 5v5 and 7v7 football).
- 4.5 In addition to the two 3G AGP's currently under construction, Council Officers are engaged in early discussions with Manchester City Council and Trafford Council regarding an opportunity to develop a multi-pitch hub site at Wythenshawe Playing Fields, which would service all three boroughs.
- 4.6 There is no expectation that the Council nor any Stockport-based Clubs would have to provide a capital contribution towards the development of the site. The land could potentially accommodate 10 pitches, of which it is anticipated that four or five would be 3G AGP.
- 4.7 Council Officers are also actively engaged with a number of local Clubs that have aspirations to develop 3G AGP's that would service the local community and alleviate shortfalls.
- 4.8 Implementing the recommendations of the PPS is overseen by a multi-disciplinary steering group comprising Council Officers from Leisure, Neighbourhoods and

Planning, National Governing Bodies (NGB's) of the relevant sports, the FF and SE. This is an established delivery structure and operates effectively.

## **5.0 LOCAL FOOTBALL FACILITIES PLAN**

- 5.1 The FA, in partnership with the Premier League, SE and DCMS, has committed to continue to make major investment in local football over the medium term. To inform and direct this investment they require Local Authorities (LA) to work with key stakeholders to produce an LFFP.
- 5.2 An LFFP is a short, well-defined 10-year investment plan that clearly identifies and highlights current assets and investment opportunities for football facilities in the LA area. It is driven by the priorities set out in the PPS but has the benefit of being flexible enough that additional projects can be added as new opportunities come to light locally.
- 5.3 Determining the priorities of the LFFP is managed by the relevant members of the PPS steering group and work to refresh our LFFP is due to commence in the Autumn.

## **6.0 RECOMMENDATION**

- 6.1 To note the findings of the PPS and approve the formal adoption of the 2024 PPS by the Cabinet Member for Communities, Culture & Sport and the Cabinet Member for Parks, Highways & Transportation Services.
- 6.2 To note the commencement of the LFFP refresh.

For more information about this report please contact Denise A. Irving-Lang: [denise.irving@stockport.gov.uk](mailto:denise.irving@stockport.gov.uk)