

# **EAST HERTS COUNCIL REPORT**

## **EXECUTIVE**

**Date of meeting:** Tuesday 18 November 2025

**Report by:** Councillor Vicky Glover-Ward– Executive Member for Planning and Growth

**Report title:** East Herts New District Plan- Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy

**Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);**

**Summary** – Members have agreed to undertake a review of the District Plan, including an update of the evidence documents needed to support the new District Plan. The Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Strategy 2025 replaces the previous playing pitch strategy, published in 2017. This report summarises the findings and seeks agreement to use the document as part of the new District Plan evidence base, and to inform Development Management decisions. It also seeks to delegate responsibility for future updates to the Action Plan to the Director for Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Growth.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE to recommend to Council that:**

- a) The Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Strategy, attached as Appendix A, B and C be agreed as part of the evidence base to inform the new East Herts District Plan and as a material consideration for Development Management purposes in the determination of planning applications.**
  
- b) Future updates of the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Action Plan be delegated to the Director for Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Growth.**

### **1.0 Proposal**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to agree that the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy (PPOSS) can be used as part of the

evidence base for the new District Plan and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. It also seeks approval for updates to the Action Plan to be delegated to the Director for Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Growth.

- 1.2 The role of the PPOSS is to inform future planning policy and planning application decisions in relation to the protection, enhancement and provision of outdoor sport in East Herts, including S106 funding. It may also have wider value for local clubs and facilities as they could use as evidence to help secure funding from National Governing Bodies and Sport England.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 Local planning authorities are required to complete a review of their local plans at least once every 5 years from the adoption date to ensure that plans remain relevant. In October 2023, the Council agreed that East Herts District Plan 2018 needs updating and that work should commence in 2023/24 on updating the technical studies and other preparatory work required to provide a robust evidence base to support this Review.

### *New District Plan Evidence Base*

- 2.2 A clear, relevant and proportionate evidence base is essential for efficient and sound plan-making to ensure that all future planning policy and decisions are based on up-to-date information. The National Planning Policy Framework (2024) sets out the requirement for the preparation and review of all policies to be 'underpinned by relevant and up-to-date evidence' (paragraph 32).
- 2.3 The evidence base consists of supporting documents that will help inform the future policies and site allocations in the new District Plan. It will cover a range of social, economic, and environmental topics and help identify local needs, constraints and opportunities. Some of the evidence will update previous studies prepared to support the current adopted District Plan. Many of these are now around 10 years old and need updating to reflect contextual and policy changes. Equally, additional evidence will be needed to

address new issues and topics that have become more prevalent in recent years.

- 2.4 The evidence base will be developed throughout the preparation of the new District Plan. As revised and updated studies are finalised, the planning policy team will seek agreement from Executive and Council to include them as part of the evidence base.

*Scope and preparation of Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy*

- 2.5 Access to high-quality, well-maintained sports facilities is vital to the health, wellbeing and social cohesion of communities in East Herts. An up-to-date Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy (PPOSS) provides a robust framework to guide the protection, enhancement and future provision of outdoor sports facilities. Sport England advise that assessments should be refreshed every 3-5 years, so the current Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy, published in 2017 to inform the adopted District Plan (2018), is out of date.
- 2.6 Therefore, the Council commissioned consultant Knight, Kavanagh and Page (KKP) jointly with North Herts Council (NHC) and Stevenage Borough Council (SBC), to develop a PPOSS for each individual local authority area. KKP are also currently undertaking an Indoor Built Facilities Strategy and an Open Space Study for the Council. These two documents will be finalised soon and reported to Members in early 2026.
- 2.7 Work on the PPOSS started in June 2024 and has been governed by a steering group made up of representatives from the Council (officers from planning policy and leisure and parks development), Sport England, Herts Sport and Physical Activity Partnership and the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs).
- 2.8 The PPOSS includes data from a range of sports: football (grass and 3G pitches), rugby, cricket, tennis/ padel, hockey, netball, athletics, lawn bowls, watersports and golf. Padel and golf were not covered by the previous assessment but have now been included on the advice of Sport England. In accordance with Sport

England requirements the development of the PPOSS has followed the stages set out below:

- Stage A: Prepare and tailor the approach.
- Stage B: Gather information and views on the supply of and demand for provision.
- Stage C: Assess the supply and demand information and views.
- Stage D: Develop the strategy.
- Stage E: Deliver the strategy and keep it robust and up to date.

2.9 The assessment of supply and demand (Stage B) was undertaken during 2024-2025. A variety of consultation methods have been used to collate information about the facilities, leagues, clubs and national governing bodies including surveys, desktop assessments, site visits, desk-top assessments and face-to-face meetings. The site visits, to assess the quality of provision, were undertaken between August 2024 and March 2025, to ensure both winter and summer sports were assessed.

2.10 To help analyse supply and demand, the district is divided into five sub-areas (named after the largest settlement within the area). This sub-division reflects the approach taken in the previous 2017 study, using Middle Super Output Areas, and is based upon the presence of common characteristics, including the prevailing economic, social, and environmental conditions and the existence of connections to, and the influence of, surrounding areas and centres. However, cross boundary issues have also been explored to determine the level of imported and exported demand, recognising, for example, that people travel to and make use of strategic facilities irrespective of administrative boundaries.

### **3.0 Reasons**

3.1 The Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy (PPOSS) is an in-depth assessment of the district's pitches and outdoor sport sites and delivers a robust and objective justification for future playing

pitch provision and enhancement throughout East Herts. In particular, the PPOSS provides:

- Evidence of supply and demand of playing pitch and outdoor sport provision.
- A vision for the future improvement and prioritisation of playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities.
- A number of aims to help deliver the recommendations and actions.
- A series of strategic recommendations which provide a strategic framework for the improvement, maintenance, development and, as appropriate, rationalisation of the playing pitch and outdoor sport facility stock.
- A series of sport-by-sport recommendations which provide a strategic framework for sport led improvements to provision.
- A prioritised area-by-area Action Plan to address key issues on a site-by-site basis.

3.2 The PPOSS has been produced in accordance with Sport England guidance and reflects requirements in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to plan positively for high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation, ensuring policies are based on robust and up to date assessments (paragraphs 98 and 103).

3.3 As part of the evidence base for the new District Plan, the PPOSS will inform planning policy and be a material consideration for planning decisions. It will also help inform S106 developer contributions. In addition, the PPOSS can also support those organisations, including the Council, involved in the delivery, provision and protection of outdoor sport facilities in the district. It is often a requirement that an area has an up-to-date PPOSS to access funding from Sport England, National Governing Bodies and other organisations. As such, the PPOSS can be used to help clubs and providers gain access to funding and investment.

3.4 The PPOSS is divided into three parts. These are:

- An Executive Summary- attached as **Appendix A** to this report.
- The Assessment Report (encompassing Stages A, B and C of the process set out in paragraph 2.8 above)- attached as **Appendix B** to this report.
- The Strategy and Action Plan Report (Stage D of the process set out in paragraph 2.8 above)- attached as **Appendix C** to this report.

### *Key findings*

3.5 The Assessment Report (**Appendix B**) sets out the context to the PPOSS, the supply and demand assessment process and the conclusions by sport. The main findings in the Assessment Report are that:

- There are some shortfalls for sports played on grass pitches (football, rugby and cricket), that further increases when considering future demand to 2043.
- The quality of grass pitches is one of the biggest influences on participation, particularly for football. It is notable that 31% of football pitches, 53% of rugby pitches and 10% of grass wicket cricket pitches with community use are assessed as poor quality.
- There is an insufficient supply of 3G Pitches (mainly for training), so new provision is required. This could also alleviate grass pitch issues.
- Broadly, demand is being met for non-pitch sports (tennis bowls, athletics, golf, netball), although several tennis and bowls clubs are operating over capacity. There is a need for more padel courts, given the growth in demand for this new sport.
- Where spare capacity exists or where demand is being met, this does not equate to a surplus of provision. Rather any spare capacity is instead considered as a solution to overcoming shortfalls.

- 3.6 The assessment uses ONS population projections, so the future demand analysis does not account for housing growth. As the new District Plan emerges and the scale and location of new development is determined, planning officers will need to use Sport England's Playing Pitch Calculator to identify the demand and pitch requirements of housing growth scenarios, to ensure future demand is not under-estimated.

### *Strategy and Action Plan*

- 3.7 Building upon the Assessment Report, the PPOSS's Strategy and Action Plan (**Appendix C**) provides a clear, strategic framework for the provision, maintenance and improvement of playing pitches and outdoor sport (including ancillary provision) up to 2043. Part 2 of the report sets out that the PPOSS vision is to work with key local partners to ensure East Herts is serviced by high quality sports facilities to meet the needs of its residents and improve their health and wellbeing. To achieve this vision, three aims are identified in Part 3: to protect existing supply, to enhance existing provision and to provide new facilities where required.
- 3.8 Part 4 develops a series of recommendations for each sport, informed by different demand scenarios, such as club ambition (information gathered during consultation) and participation trend changes. There is a clear need to protect existing playing pitch provision, in line with planning policy, unless replacement provision meets NPPF and Sport England requirements and is agreed upon and provided.
- 3.9 Many of the identified shortfalls can be met by utilising current provision by improving pitch quality, providing additional lighting, improving ancillary facilities, increasing match play on 3G pitches, reinstating unused provision and increasing community use agreements at schools.
- 3.10 Building on the sport specific recommendations, Part 5 of the report identifies strategic recommendations, which have been

developed via the combination of information gathered during consultation, site visits and analysis which culminated in the production of an assessment report, as well as key drivers identified for the Strategy. They reflect overarching and common areas to be addressed, which apply across playing pitch and outdoor sport facilities and may not be specific to just one sport. The identified **strategic priorities** are:

- **Protect** all existing facilities, including disused/poor sites, until shortfalls are addressed.
- **Enhance** quality through maintenance programmes (e.g., GMA Pitch Advisory Service, PitchPower app) and ancillary upgrades.
- **Provide** new facilities where required, prioritising:
  - Additional 3G pitches, current shortfall of four 11v11 3G pitches for football use.
  - New full-size hockey Artificial Grass Pitch to service East Hertfordshire, North Hertfordshire and Stevenage.
  - Padel courts, need to develop 10 new courts to service demand.
  - Secure tenure and access via long-term leases and formal community use agreements, especially at education sites.
- Maximise developer contributions using Sport England's Playing Pitch Calculator; prioritise multi-pitch/multi-sport hubs.
- Inclusive and sustainable provision, ensuring accessibility for women, girls, and under-represented groups.

3.11 The site-by-site action plan (Part 6 of the Strategy report) seeks to address key issues identified in the assessment and strategy. It provides actions based on current levels of usage, quality and future demand, as well as the potential of each site for enhancement. It is organised by Analysis Area and includes information on expected timescales, costs, partners and priority. Each action is linked to one or more of the aims (protect, enhance, provide) and provides guidance for how improvements would be



made should the resources become available. It should be noted that in many instances the Council will not be responsible for the delivery of the recommendations and actions in the PPOSS, as clubs, national governing bodies, town/ parish councils, education providers and landowners can also be responsible.

- 3.12 The action plan is considered a 'live' document and should be regularly monitored and reviewed by the steering group, to ensure it is kept up to date. This is identified as Stage E in the Sport England guidance (set out in paragraph 2.8 of this report) As a guide, if no review and subsequent update is carried out within three years, Sport England and the national governing bodies will consider it to be out of date. If kept up to date, its lifespan can be extended. On this basis the action plan will be reviewed annually by the steering group.

#### *Next Steps*

- 3.13 The PPOSS has been signed off by the steering group, including Sport England. It is the view of officers that the PPOSS provides detailed, robust and up-to-date information about playing pitch and outdoor sport provision in East Herts, so it is recommended the study is agreed as part of the new District Plan evidence base and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.
- 3.14 In order to allow regular updates to the Action Plan, it is recommended that approval for future updates to the PPOSS Action Plan is delegated to the Director of Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Growth. This report seeks approval for that arrangement.

## **4.0 Options**

- 4.1 The endorsement of the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy ensures there is an up-to-date evidence base for the protection, enhancement and provision of sports facilities, which play a

significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of East Herts residents.

- 4.2 The Council could choose not to agree to the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy, but this would be contrary to Sport England advice and would mean reliance on the previous PPOSS, which is now 8 years old and out of date. This is contrary to the Government policy to have up-to-date evidence base and would undermine the Council's position in terms of successfully bringing forward the new District Plan. It would also mean that the evidence would have less weight in the determination of planning applications.

## **5.0 Risks**

- 5.1 If the PPOSS is not agreed as part of the evidence base, it may be considered as having reduced weight in informing the strategy and the policy in the new District Plan. This would mean that significant information about playing pitch and outdoor sport provision could be undervalued. This would be contrary to Government policy to have robust evidence and could undermine the Council's position in terms of successfully bringing forward the new East Herts District Plan. Equally, without the 2025 PPOSS the Council will not be able to ensure that the development management process takes into account the latest recommendations about outdoor sport requirements in the district.

## **6.0 Implications/Consultations**

- 6.1 Targeted consultation as part of the assessment was undertaken with facility providers, clubs, local leagues, schools, National Governing Bodies, town and parish councils and Sport England. The Strategy will also be subject to a number of statutory public consultations as part of the production of the new District Plan.

### **Community Safety**

There are no community safety implications arising from this report.

### **Data Protection**

There are no data protection implications arising from this report.

### **Equalities**

There are no equalities implications arising from this report.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. Grass playing pitches are part of the district's green infrastructure, which alongside social benefits, has many environmental benefits, such as climate change mitigation, habitat creation and sustainable drainage.

### **Financial**

By agreeing a robust strategy, the Council will be in a better position to achieve external grant funding, if required, and secure S106 developer contributions to assist in delivery of the action plan.

### **Health and Safety**

There are no health and safety implications arising from this report.

### **Human Resources**

There are no human resource implications arising from this report.

### **Human Rights**

There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

### **Legal**

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

### **Specific Wards**

No

## **7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material**

### **7.1 Appendix A: Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy - Executive Summary**

7.2 **Appendix B:** Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy – Assessment Report

7.3 **Appendix C:** Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy – Strategy and Action Plan

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