

East Herts Council Report

District Planning Executive Panel

Date of meeting: Tuesday 23 June 2026

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

Report title: Local Plan: Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and Strategy

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Summary

- Members have agreed to prepare a new Local Plan including an update of the evidence documents needed to support the new Plan. The Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and Strategy replaces the previous playing pitch strategy, published in 2017. This report summarises the key priorities of the Study and seeks agreement to use the document as part of the new Local Plan evidence base, and to inform Development Management decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL: that the Executive be advised that:

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

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to agree that the Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and Strategy can be used as part of the evidence base for the new Local Plan and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. It also seeks approval

for updates to the Action Plan (which is contained within the Strategy Report) to be delegated to the Director for Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Growth.

- 1.2 The role of the Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and Strategy is to inform future planning policy and planning application decisions in relation to the protection, enhancement and provision of indoor built facilities in East Herts, including S106 funding. It may also have wider value for local clubs and facilities as they could use the study 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 on updating the technical studies and other preparatory work required to provide a robust evidence base to support this Review. The intention to formally start plan-making was agreed at Council on 10 June 2026.
- 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 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 Local Plan. It will cover a range of social, economic, and environmental topics and help identify local needs, constraints and opportunities.
- 2.4 The evidence base will be developed throughout the preparation of the new Local Plan, and the planning policy team will seek agreement from Executive via the District Planning Executive Panel to include relevant studies as part of the evidence base. Because of the nature of the Indoor Sport Assessment and Strategy and its potential to influence policy formulation, it is considered appropriate to include it within the Council's evidence

base.

- 2.5 Access to high-quality, well-maintained sports facilities is vital to the health, wellbeing and social cohesion of communities in East Herts. Up-to-date sport assessments and strategies provide a robust framework to guide the protection, enhancement and future provision of sports facilities. Sport England advise that assessments should be refreshed every 3-5 years. The current Indoor Built Facility Study, 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 Indoor and Outdoor Sport Assessments and Strategies for each individual local authority area. The East Herts Outdoor Sport and Playing Pitch Strategy has already been approved by the Council and was published in December 2025.
- 2.7 Work on the Indoor Sports Assessment started in August 2024 and has been informed by 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). The assessment of supply and demand was undertaken during 2024-2025. A variety of consultation methods have been used to collate information about the facilities, leagues, clubs, town and parish councils and NGBs 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 in autumn/ winter 2024.
- 2.8 Sport England's Facilities Planning Model (FPM) has informed the assessment of swimming pools and sports halls, to provide a more robust assessment of facility needs than traditional supply and demand analysis, taking into account accessibility, capacity and utilisation of facilities to better understand community needs and where unmet demand may exist. The FPM was undertaken by Sport England's consultants in 2025, but its delivery was delayed by nationwide capacity issues. This has meant the timescale between the audit and the strategy document is longer than expected. However, to ensure information is up-to-date, the data has been reviewed and any changes to provision has been

detailed and considered.

3.0 Reason(s)

- 3.1 Since the previous assessment in 2017, housing growth across East Herts, together with changes to leisure facilities, has reshaped both the demand for and supply of provision. Notably, there have been key changes to public leisure centre provision and new school sports hall provision. The Indoor Sport Assessment and Strategy will ensure there is an up-to-date understanding of current and future indoor built sport facility needs to inform the development of the new Local Plan. Future need is assessed using Office of National Statistics (ONS) population projections and the Government's Standard Method figure as a housing-led proxy for population growth. This provides an indicative, high-level understanding of future need, but officers will need to re-run the calculations as the Local Plan progresses and there is more certainty about the scale and distribution of growth. There are a number of allocated District Plan sites still to come forward, and these are included in the assessment.
- 3.2 The Indoor Sport Assessment and Strategy includes a range of facilities and sports, determined in collaboration with Sport England and the NGBs: sports halls (and associated indoor sports), swimming pools, health and fitness, dance/aerobic studios, squash, indoor tennis, padel, indoor bowls, gymnastics and trampolining, combat sports and community/ village halls. In accordance with Sport England requirements the development of the study 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
- 3.3 The Assessment and Strategy is divided into three parts. 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 3.2) - attached as **Appendix B** to

this report. The Strategy Report (Stage D) - attached as **Appendix C** to this report. The Facilities Planning Model, which informed the assessment of supply and demand for sports halls and swimming pools - attached as **Appendix D** to this report.

Needs assessment findings

- 3.4 The Assessment Report (**Appendix B**) sets out the context, the supply and demand assessment process and the conclusions by sport. The main findings in the Assessment Report are as follows:

Sports halls

- Overall, East Herts has a good supply of good and above average quality sports halls for a range of sports, such as badminton, basketball, futsal, netball, volleyball and indoor cricket. Even with significant population growth, the district is expected to have enough capacity to meet demand both now and in the future; taking into account planned provision at the allocated sites (three new halls at Gilston; one at Birchall Garden Suburb and one at Land North and East of Ware). Most demand is already being met locally, with very little unmet need. There is more localised provision in urban areas, all residents are within 20 minutes' drive of a sports hall.
- However, the district relies heavily on school sports halls, so maintaining good community access agreements will be essential. Also, some individual sites—especially key education facilities and Wodson Park—are already very busy at peak times, and several are projected to reach full capacity by 2043. The new sports hall at Simon Balle School, will help provide more capacity in the Hertford and Ware area.

Swimming pools

- Public leisure centres provide the majority of swimming pool capacity and meet the most visits across the district. Nearly all current and future demand for swimming pools in East Hertfordshire is met by the available supply, although up to a quarter of residents' demand is satisfied at facilities outside East Hertfordshire. This takes account of the provision of a new public swimming pool at Gilston.

- Access to pay and play provision is more limited in the northern part of the district and there are small areas of low unmet demand at Ware, Buntingford and Sawbridgeworth. However, the re-opening of Fanshawe Pool (now Chauncy School Pool) for use by Ware Swim Club and swimming lessons, alongside the community group's plans to re-open Ward Freman Pool, will positively help address localised demand in these areas, whilst also reducing travel time.

Health and fitness suites

- There is a good supply of health and fitness provision, and demand is high. Current and future demand is expected to be met by current supply, although increases in participation may necessitate future provision.

Squash

- Provision falls slightly below England Squash's benchmark of one court per 10,000 residents, but all clubs report some spare capacity, and no unmet demand was identified. Court quality is acceptable, with all facilities rated above average. Pay and play opportunities should be expanded where possible.

Indoor Tennis/ Padel

- There is currently no further provision for traditional indoor tennis provision required. However, padel is currently a growing sport and the Lawn Tennis Association identify demand for new Padel courts, which can include covered provision.

Gymnastics and trampolining

- There are five dedicated gymnastics sites and three non-dedicated sites, so accessibility to facilities is good. However, there is some club demand for larger premises.

Indoor bowls

- There is no existing or future demand identified for additional indoor bowl facilities in the district.

Combat sports

- Good provision, with no clubs reporting issues with facility size or quality.

Community and Village halls

- There are 57 village and community halls distributed across the district, which help meet localised sport and physical activity needs. These play an important role in East Hert's facility network, offering a range of opportunities, particularly in the rural areas which have less sports provision than the urban areas in East Herts.

Strategy recommendations

- 3.5 Building upon the Assessment Report, the Indoor Sport Strategy (**Appendix C**) provides a clear, strategic framework for the provision, maintenance and improvement of indoor sports facilities. Key strategic recommendations and actions include:

- providing planning policies in the new Local Plan to protect existing facilities and include requirements to seek relevant planning contributions, to help fund the required actions of this Strategy.
- Ensuring new and existing leisure facilities meet the current and future needs of the existing population. New and enhanced provision secured via new development should be guided by this assessment and strategy, including working with developers to ensure delivery of the Gilston Leisure Centre; and prioritising funding to enhance/ improve existing indoor built facility provision as required (e.g. S106 or grants).
- Strengthening partnerships with schools/ community groups to secure long-term, high-quality community access, secure community use agreements at the new schools at Gilston, Birchall Garden Suburb and North and East of Ware and support school/ community pools in Ware and Buntingford.
- Improving affordability, pay and play and dedicated spaces across facilities; seek to improve daytime access to sports halls to support the aging population; work with National

Governing Bodies that identify capacity issues, for example Badminton England expressed demand for a dedicated facility in Hertfordshire and British Gymnastics want to explore opportunities to reduce waiting lists.

- Ensuring new development supports the provision of community and village halls, to support their role in delivering localised sport and physical activity, particularly in rural areas.

3.6 Section 2.2 of the Strategy Report (**Appendix C**) includes an action plan with overarching and site-specific recommendations, which address key issues identified in the assessment. It provides actions based on current levels of usage, quality and future demand, as well as the potential of each site for enhancement. In many instances the Council will not be responsible for the delivery of the recommendations and actions, as clubs, National Governing Bodies, town/ parish councils, education providers and landowners can also be responsible.

3.7 The action plan is considered a 'live' document and should be regularly monitored and reviewed to ensure it is kept up to date. This is identified as Stage E in the Sport England guidance (set out in paragraph 3.2 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 at the same time as the review of the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy.

3.8 It is the view of officers that the Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and Strategy provides detailed, robust and up-to-date information about indoor built sport facilities in East Herts, so it is recommended the study is agreed as part of the new Local Plan evidence base and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. It can also support those organisations, including the Council, involved in the delivery, provision and protection of indoor sport facilities in the district. It is often a requirement that an area has an up-to-date indoor sport strategy to access funding from Sport England, National Governing Bodies and other organisations. As such, the Indoor Sport Assessment and Strategy can be used to help clubs and providers gain access to funding and investment.

3.9 In order to allow regular updates to the action plan it is recommended that approval for future updates to the Indoor Sport Action Plan is delegated to the Director for 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 Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and 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 Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and Strategy, but this would be contrary to Sport England advice and would mean reliance on the previous assessment, which is now nine years old and out of date. This is contrary to Government policy to have an up-to-date evidence base and would undermine the Council's position in terms of successfully bringing forward the new Local 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 Indoor Sport Needs Assessment and Strategy is not agreed as part of the evidence base, it may be considered as having reduced weight in informing the new Local Plan and planning application decisions. It would mean the Council would not have an up to date understanding of indoor sport facilities in East Herts. This is contrary to Government policy to have an up-to-date evidence base and could undermine the Council's position in terms of successfully bringing forward the new Local Plan.

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 Study will be made available on the website, in the Local Plan evidence base section, and be subject to a number of

statutory public consultations as part of the production of the new Local Plan.

Community Safety

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Data Protection

There are no data protection implications arising from this report.

Equalities

There are no direct equality, diversity, or inclusion implications in this evidence document. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) will be carried out of the new Local Plan in accordance with The Equality Act 2010.

Environmental Sustainability

The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. Facilities for sport and physical activity contribute to community cohesion, health and well-being.

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 actions.

Health and Safety

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

Human Resources

There are no human resources 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

All wards

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 Appendix A: Executive Summary

- 7.2 **Appendix B:** Indoor Sport Assessment and Strategy – Needs Assessment Report
- 7.3 **Appendix C:** Indoor Sport Assessment and Strategy – Strategy Report
- 7.4 **Appendix D:** Facilities Planning Models for sports halls and swimming pools

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