

West Berkshire Council

PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2024 - 2041

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COUNCIL

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1. INTRODUCTION

This document is an executive summary of the Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) for West Berkshire. It is brief and is not the full strategy or list of actions; it should not be read as such. The PPS covers the period to 2041 and is compliant with the most up-to-date Sport England guidance¹. At its heart has been close liaison between the consultants commissioned to develop the strategy (Stuart Todd Associates), West Berkshire Council, National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Sport England, while consultation with clubs, operators, owners and providers of pitches and courts has been critical to understanding the needs of sports.

The strategy covers grass and artificial pitches used for football, rugby union, hockey, cricket and lacrosse and outdoor courts used for tennis and netball.

A PPS serves multiple functions across sport, leisure, planning and public health. It supports not only formal club-based sport but also social, casual and informal sport, encouraging broader participation and increased physical activity. It provides an audit of the quality, quantity and accessibility of playing pitches, establishes the current levels of demand (and therefore whether pitches are being over or under used) and identifies future levels of demand to the end of the strategy period. In doing so, it seeks to ensure that the appropriate level of pitch provision is aligned with both current needs and anticipated growth, enabling effective long-term planning.

The Playing Pitch Strategy plays the following roles:



1. Evidence base

- Provides robust evidence to protect existing provision in the planning system, helping to defend against inappropriate loss of pitches and courts.



2. Quality

- Helps identify improvements to quality and condition of pitches, courts and ancillary facilities (including infrastructure such as clubhouses, changing facilities, pavilions, sports-lighting, dugouts, etc.).



3. Future Provision

- Provides a strategic view and options for the provision of pitches during the strategy period.



4. Investment

- Informs the investment to be made into club sites.
- Can be used to support funding applications for improvements to quality, quantity and accessibility.



5. Development

- Informs the planning of new developments and on/off-site contributions for pitches and courts, ensuring they are consistent with national and local policy.



6. Planning Policy

- Informs planning policy development.



7. Health and Wellbeing

- Forms an important part of the “package” of strategies, evidence and actions which can contribute towards improving the physical and mental health and wellbeing of those who live and work in the area.

¹ See https://www.sportengland.org/guidance-and-support/facilities-and-planning/planning-sport?section=assessing_needs_and_playing_pitch_strategy_guidance

What the strategy does not and cannot do is provide a blueprint for change to 2041. The strategy can present options based on evidence and assessment of it (and indeed recommendations), but cannot do the work necessary (for example, logistical, feasibility and viability work) required to confirm actions with 100% certainty and make things happen “on the ground”, which is the task of the many stakeholders (such as clubs, providers, owners and managers of pitches) and organisations (such as the Council, sports governing bodies and Sport England) responsible for delivery of pitches and ancillary facilities (including infrastructure such as clubhouses, changing facilities, pavilions, sports-lighting, dugouts, etc.).

Without regular monitoring and review of its recommendations during stage E (the delivery stage), the strategy could be considered out-of-date in around 5 years time.

The strategy’s Vision is as follows.

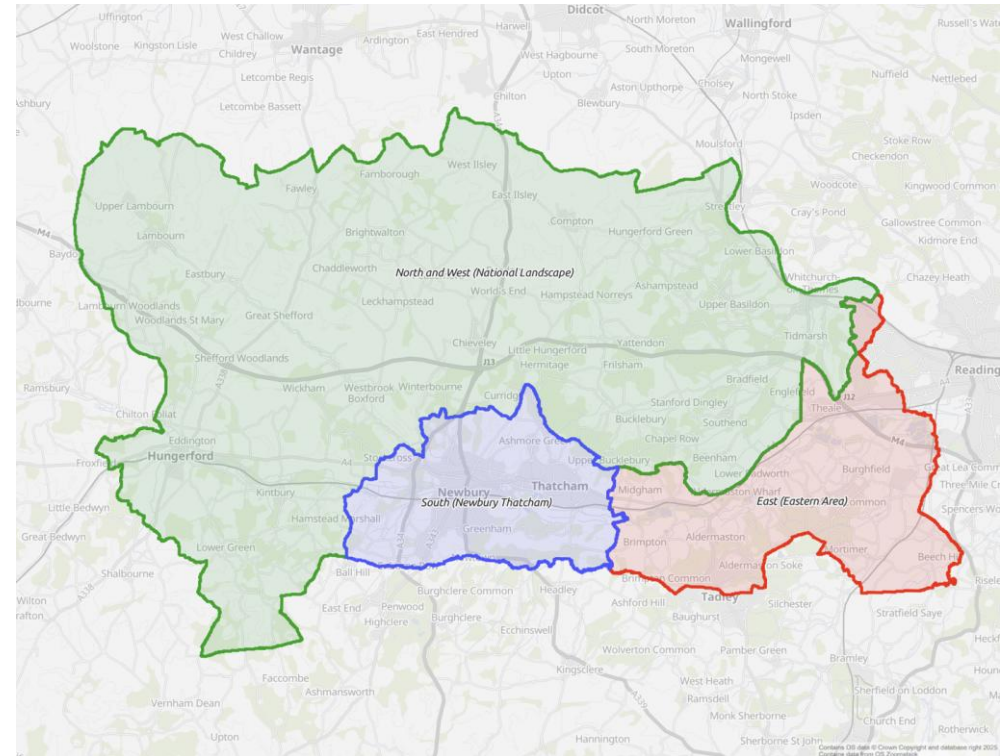
Vision

“The PPS seeks to support the Council and its partners in the creation of an accessible, high quality and sustainable network of sports pitches and other outdoor sports facilities which supports increased sports participation by all residents, at all levels of play, from grassroots to elite.”

The study area for the PPS is the whole of the West Berkshire Council (WBC) area, as shown below (Figure 1). The map also shows the sub-areas used for analysis and presentation of the strategy’s

recommendations and actions. These sub-areas align with the areas used for planning policy purposes.

Figure 1: The Study Area and Sub-Areas



This PPS is a strategy for pitch sports. While the development of the strategy was commissioned by West Berkshire Council (and therefore “ownership” of the strategy rests principally with the local authority), this does not mean that all recommendations must be delivered solely by the Council. Delivery is the responsibility of all members of the steering group, and also of other key stakeholders such as (but not limited to) clubs, providers, operators and land owners.

2. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

From the assessment undertaken, strategic priorities can be identified. These set the core “thrust” of the strategy in broad terms, providing the overarching context for the detailed and site-specific “Protect”, “Enhance” and “Provide” recommendations (set out in full in Background Document 1) and delivery of priority actions set out in the main strategy document.

The strategic priorities, across sports, are as follows.



1. PROTECT

- i. **Protect existing supply** of grass playing pitches and AGPs, both those in use which currently host known demand and those not currently in use (including those available but unused, those not available for community use and disused sites) on the basis of the need to address lack of capacity for some sports in the WBC area, the need to introduce a “reservoir” of grass pitch supply to provide additional capacity during the winter months, the lack of any “new” greenfield sites to introduce additional supply and the potential for future demand also requiring their use. Any proposals for change of use or development of pitches must pass the Sport England Playing Fields Policy tests and relevant National Planning Policy Framework requirements.



2. ENHANCE

- i. **Improve existing pitches, courts and ancillary facilities**, where possible, to make better and maximise use of supply:
 - a) to grass pitch quality to increase carrying capacity, reduce overplay / deficit of capacity and improve reliability of use during wet winters for football and rugby union, prioritising improvements where

increased usage is demonstrably practical and feasible;

- b) to increase provision of lighting on grass rugby pitches where this is in sync with quality improvements and improved maintenance;
 - c) to substandard surfaces and lighting on identified AGPs;
 - d) to outdoor tennis and netball courts in poor or sub-standard condition; and,
 - e) to the accessibility to, safety of and quality of changing facilities, clubhouses and pavilions (including provision of facilities where there are currently none, where there is known or likely demand from clubs), particularly given the desired growth across sports in the girls’ and women’s game and in disability sport.
- ii. There is a need for continuing partnership working with the operators / owners of pitches and clubs which use sites with unsecure community use (or clubs with no certainty of tenure in the long-term) to **secure tenure**, thereby minimising the risk to clubs of loss of use of their pitches.



3. PROVIDE

- i. Develop and implement the masterplan for the strategic **Henwick Worthy** site, Thatcham, aiming to:
 - a. create a hockey hub site;
 - b. maintain and improve capacity for rugby and football;
 - c. maintain capacity for cricket; and,
 - d. make various environmental and leisure / recreation enhancements.

- ii. Support improvements to the **Faraday Road** football pitch site, Newbury, including provision of a full-size (11v11) sports-lit 3G pitch.
- iii. Alongside other measures, consider the role and location of a new **strategic hub site** for sport(s) in the Newbury / Thatcham area to help cater for existing deficits / overlap and future demand.
- iv. Identify and deliver additional sites which can accommodate **new grass pitches** to meet demand not satisfied through pitch quality improvements or bringing back into use unused pitches.
- v. Co-ordinate the **phasing of delivery** within and across sports, particularly in relation to sports which currently (or could in the future) share pitches, sites, facilities and / or surface types.
- vi. Address the current deficit in the supply and availability of **3G pitches** across sub-areas.
- vii. There is an under supply of **cricket pitches** in the more densely populated areas of Newbury, Thatcham, Reading fringe and the A4 corridor and these to be addressed via a variety of options including:
 - a. create new cricket pitches opportunities on existing playing fields and open spaces.
 - b. enhance the quality of the existing facilities to maximise the capacity of the current pitches.
 - c. ensure sites are supported by off field practice net facilities where feasible.
- viii. Provide additional **netball and tennis court capacity** for community use at existing outdoor netball and tennis club and education sites where demand requires it, with additional sports lighting provided at sites which see or could see evening use during the sports' seasons.
- ix. Support the development of new padel courts across parks, clubs, leisure centres and private-sector venues to meet identified unmet demand, permitting conversion of existing tennis courts only where an LTA-approved capacity assessment confirms that tennis demand will continue to be met.
- x. Accommodate **exported football demand** wishing to return to West Berkshire, particularly teams using grass pitches in neighbouring authority areas. Clarifying aspirations of clubs with displaced demand wishing to return to West Berkshire area will form an important part of this process.
- xi. Opportunities should be taken to consider the relationship between (and potential impacts of) existing and future pitch use and the contribution of their location and use to the reduction of carbon emissions, as well as wider sustainability issues. Solutions, within and outside of sport, should be considered to help **decarbonise sport** and, in turn, improve viability, financial security and sustainability of pitches, courts and clubs.

3. DELIVERING THE STRATEGY

The strategy provides an objectively, evidence based “direction of travel”, with the aim of achieving positive outcomes for people who play or would like to play sport and cannot be a “blueprint” for change. In doing so it must be recognised that:

- i. Data, projections and demand gathered principally in 2024/25 will change over time. Therefore, the strategy’s delivery (and therefore the impact on existing and future supply and demand

challenges) must be monitored, and the timing, amount and location of delivery will vary during the strategy period.

- ii. In the majority of cases, the PPS provides flexibility and a range of options to deliver additional supply. This is necessary to give flexibility of plans of what to deliver and when with regard to new pitch capacity. It is not the role of the PPS to “straight-jacket” options over a 15 year period and stage E monitoring and delivery meetings (1 to 4 per year) are key to successful delivery responding to demand “on the ground”.
- iii. The PPS informs future NGB investment plans and programmes (across both pitch and facility support for clubs and wider support for operational requirements).

3.1 Monitoring and Review

It is important that baseline data such as team numbers and supply / demand balance, the strategy itself and the impact of its actions are monitored to ensure that supply matches both projected demand set out in this strategy and demand “on the ground”.

This is particularly important later during the strategy period given that the timing of when future demand will emerge “on the ground” in the longer-term is less accurate given that it is based on projections.

As actions are implemented, a “plan, deliver, monitor, manage” approach should be employed. It is recommended that a “Stage E” action plan review meeting of the Steering Group should take place at 3, 6 or 12 monthly intervals, but more frequently if issues suggest a need. These meetings must not be a replacement for important delivery work which should take place on a continuous basis between delivery partners.

Additional guidance for use of this strategy by local authority officers has been set out in Background Document 2.

3.2 Recommendations and Action Plan Priorities by Sport

The strategy’s detailed recommendations encapsulated within “Protect”, “Enhance” and “Provide” headings are set-out in full in Background Document 1. These set out the individual and issue specific actions which need to take place during the period to 2041.

Following consultation on the draft strategy and any changes made as a result, confirmed recommendations and actions should be set out and monitored in a “live” action plan framework which members of the steering group will have a responsibility to update and implement.

As noted earlier this implementation will also depend on steering group members co-ordinating and working closely with clubs, teams, league organisers, providers / operators, owners of current pitches and owners of pitches and potential sites for additional pitches.

The action plan framework will, in time, be updated and delivery informed by other priorities such as (but not limited to) response to the climate emergency, economic recovery and levels of deprivation. The delivery stage will also confirm options for change on a site-by-site basis as further work during implementation is done on feasibility, viability and implications of other actions.

PPS guidance recommends that an action plan is consulted upon as part of the strategy and therefore priority actions are presented for each sport in the main strategy document.