
TITLE: Outdoor Sports Facilities & Playing Pitch Strategy

Committee: Operational Services Committee

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[W66]

1. ISSUE

- 1.1. To consider the adoption of the principles arising for the Outdoor Sports Facilities & Playing Pitch Strategy.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1. Members are requests to note the
- i) Note the Outdoor Sports Facilities & Playing Pitch Strategy as outlined in Appendix 1 and 2; and
 - ii) Agree the use of the Outdoor Sports Facilities & Playing Pitch Strategies as an evidence base for securing provision, improvement and maintenance of outdoor sport and playing pitches across the district.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. Members will be aware that, with the exception of the synthetic turf pitch at the Hive, ECDC is not itself a provider of outdoor sports facilities; they are owned and managed by the Parish Councils, sports clubs and educational trusts. As the Local Authority however, ECDC has a significant enabling role; supporting and working with providers, sports governing bodies and sports agencies to identify and address any gaps or opportunities.
- 3.2. In recent years, broader changes in the funding and planning environments have entailed an increasingly structured and strategic approach to sports provision. In order to support this and to create an objective evidence-base, Sport England has developed standardised procedures for needs assessment and planning, which helps to shape funding decisions. It also informs broader planning work, for example in relation to s.106 agreements accompanying larger housing developments, and provides a basis for the protection of amenities which may be threatened by built development.
- 3.3. Against this background, ECDC commissioned a review of indoor sports provision in 2014/15, and this work informed the development and funding of the Hive. To complement this indoor study Officers commissioned an Outdoor Sports Facilities & Playing Pitch Audit and development of a high level strategy.

4. OBJECTIVES

- 4.1. The objectives of the study were:
 - 4.1.1. To establish an up-to-date record of outdoor sports facilities across the District.
 - 4.1.2. To evaluate the fitness for purpose of the facility-stock, based on technical sports requirements and other relevant benchmarks.
 - 4.1.3. To anticipate future facility needs and priorities for development.
 - 4.1.4. To involve key partner organisations and local stakeholders in the process and support engagement with sport-specific development strategies.

5. METHODOLOGY

- 5.1. In commissioning the study, several components needed to be addressed:
 - 5.1.1. Formal pitch provision- for team games such as cricket, football, hockey and rugby – is generally a core component, as these are often the key ‘building blocks’ in outdoor sports provision and the technical standards are well-established. Provision for these sports was assessed using the Sport England Playing Pitch Strategy methodology.
 - 5.1.2. Small pitch or court provision – for bowls, netball, tennis, and multi-use games areas; and also provision for track and field athletics - was assessed using the Sport England Needs Assessment methodology, which adopts similar principles but with a slightly different framework.
 - 5.1.3. Opportunities for more informal ‘trail-based’ activities such as walking, running and cycling - for which there is no directly comparable methodology - were assessed by examining the proximity of facilities within each Parish, and the amount of open space in each village or town per 1,000 population. These are improvised measures, adopted for practicality and cost-effectiveness at this stage.
- 5.2. The full reports are attached as Appendices 1 (Playing Pitch Strategy) and 2 (Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy). A summary document is provided at Appendix 3.

6. LIMITATIONS

- 6.1. The audit provides a snapshot of provision at the time it was conducted; the picture can change as teams form or disband, or where usage arrangements change (in this respect outdoor facility usage is more fluid than that of indoor facilities). For this reason, the strategies will require regular review to ensure that they remain current.

- 6.2. For both technical and practical reasons, this work was led by formal sports provision. Although the opportunity was taken to conduct an outline review of opportunities for cycling, running and walking, further work would be needed to fully map provision for these activities. This is not to underestimate the importance of these informal activities, but a reflection of the methodological constraints.
- 6.3. The Sport England methodologies were developed to ensure consistency of approach and comparability of outcomes. This provides a fair degree of robustness, but leans more towards audit than to a finely granulated understanding of every local situation – particularly as the engagement of local stakeholders (sports clubs as the key users, and Parish Councils as the facility owners) was highly variable. Qualitative assessment therefore relied largely upon the site-observations of the consultants, with local input in some specific instances; and we may have to seek more information about the local context as and when any further facility proposals emerge. The county sports governing bodies, and Sport England, were actively involved in the process however, and this has helped to consolidate working relationships and provides a stronger platform for facility development.
- 6.4. Acknowledging these qualifications, officers are satisfied that the primary purpose of the work was achieved, the report findings are generally sound, and the inferences drawn are reasonable.

7. SUMMARY FINDINGS

- 7.1. The need for the existing outdoor sports facilities is not in question – not only for the sports in question, but also as communal open spaces. In most of the villages at least, they are one and the same, and serve a multitude of functions, even if much of the usage is informal and difficult to measure.
- 7.2. Overall there is a reasonable balance of demand and supply for outdoor sports facilities; most people living in the District have a range of facilities of acceptable quality and within acceptable travel-distance. There are some qualifications to this, which are outlined below as emerging issues.
- 7.3. The dominant formal sport in terms of facilities and activity-levels is football, for which there are pitches and teams – of one kind or another - across most of the district. Hockey and Rugby are centred in Ely, but with strong clubs in Newmarket and Cambridge effectively serving the south of the District. Bowls, cricket, netball and tennis are played at various locations; though netball is largely focused around Ely, and tennis coaching and development are again centred on Ely or Newmarket. There are no athletics facilities in the District – the nearest for most people being in Cambridge - though running for fitness is reasonably strong.
- 7.4. Activity space provision varies markedly across the district. It broadly aligns with Fields in Trust (formerly NPFA) benchmark guidelines for space per 1,000 population, and (perhaps more loosely) with those relating to travel distance. There are again some qualifications to this general picture, although the issue was not directly raised in any consultation responses.

8. ISSUES EMERGING

- 8.1. There is a modest overall deficit in football pitch capacity, which tends to show up more acutely in localised deficits, where:
 - 8.1.1. Pitches are of poor playing quality, or particularly susceptible to weather conditions
 - 8.1.2. Support facilities (changing, parking) are inadequate
 - 8.1.3. Usage arrangements are insecure
 - 8.1.4. The facilities cannot support current or potential programme growth, particularly at junior - youth level, and among women and girls. This 'latent demand' is the most significant driver for facility development.
- 8.2. Such issues have caused the loss of some teams in the past, and if not addressed will probably continue to do so. Perversely, this can lead to a situation where a playing field is under-utilised and may therefore appear surplus to requirements.
- 8.3. There are specific qualitative weaknesses in some cricket facilities - generally in practice nets rather than main pitch areas - and some seasonal overlaps with football. Some clubs have identified lack of capacity as a constraint on development.
- 8.4. For hockey, netball, rugby and tennis the facility limitations are also primarily qualitative and technical, and the likely priority is to strengthen 'hub' sites for coaching and competition.
- 8.5. For athletics, the problem is slightly circular: there is insufficient structured activity to support a full specification facility, but without any facility it is difficult to develop the activity. Any development here will therefore be starting 'from scratch', and is likely to require a phased approach, potentially starting with a compact training facility which also serves other sports.
- 8.6. Bowls participation has been in retreat for some years and the issue emerging – in a sport dominated by membership-based clubs - is one of viability rather than capacity. The likely focus is therefore on developing the participation-base rather than facilities. There may also be qualitative weaknesses in some facilities, but these are unlikely to be the primary problem.
- 8.7. For all activities, population growth may create increased pressure on space over coming years, particularly in higher growth areas. This may be offset or compounded by a range of other factors so should not be taken in isolation, but needs to be considered alongside more localised pressures.

9. CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1. Some localised facility development is clearly required to remedy identified weaknesses; support the growth of clubs and programmes; and allow for future population growth. All such development will entail site-specific strategies in

collaboration with the clubs, governing bodies, facility-owners, and may be led by any or all of:

- 9.1.1. Locally driven initiatives, generally leading into external funding applications and project development.
 - 9.1.2. Housing development, generating a quantifiable need for significant additional facilities, which can be incorporated into the development or into a related off-site facility.
 - 9.1.3. Sport-specific development strategies, generally driven by sports governing bodies at national or regional level
- 9.2. Often these mechanisms will operate in concert, and part of the importance of this study is that it helps to draw these threads together into a coherent strategy for a site or locality.
- 9.3. The work carried out provides an updated evidence-base and a coherent rationale to support each of the mechanisms above, and therefore provides a platform for appropriate measures to protect, enhance and augment outdoor sports provision as required in each locality.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1. Members are asked to note the strategies and agree the use of these strategies as a principal basis for continuing work with partners and stakeholders to provide, improve and maintain outdoor sports provision across the district.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS / EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT/ CARBON IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 11.1. The work was funded from existing budgets, and no new budgetary implications arise.
- 11.2. The proposals do not directly affect any particular participation group or protected characteristic. No new equalities implications therefore follow from these proposals.
- 11.3. There are no direct positive or negative carbon impact implications for ECDC. There may be very modest benefits from more efficient use of spaces, and improved local provision (so slightly fewer journeys outside of the village), but these would depend upon activity levels and cannot be quantified at this stage.

Background Documents

None

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