

**Planning Policy  
Statement**

**A Sporting Future  
for the Playing Fields of England**

**Policy on planning applications for  
development on playing fields**



## Introduction

- I1 Playing fields are one of the most important resources for sport in England. They provide the space which is required for the playing of team sports on outdoor pitches. Yet as open land, particularly in urban areas, becomes an increasingly scarce resource, they often seem to offer a tempting opportunity for other forms of development. **Sport England opposes such development in all but exceptional cases, whether the land is in public, private or educational use.** It does so because the loss of any part of a playing field may represent the irretrievable loss of an opportunity for participation in pitch sports, and with it the many benefits which sport brings.
- I2 By virtue of a statutory instrument made in 1996, Sport England is a statutory consultee on proposals for development which affect playing fields, land used for playing fields at any time in the last five years which remains undeveloped, or land which is identified for use as a playing field in a development plan. This means that we must be notified by the local planning authority when a relevant planning application is received, and any objections we raise must be considered. Although we expect that local planning authorities will attach great importance to the views we express, we do not have the power to prevent development. We will advise the relevant Government regional office of applications which we consider of such concern that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions should consider calling them in for determination.
- I3 Through our opposition to their development, Sport England aims to ensure that there is no further reduction in the supply of conveniently located, quality playing fields to satisfy the current and likely future demand. However, we also recognise that it is the inclusion of policies protecting playing fields in development plans which will have the greatest impact. We will seek to ensure that such policies are an integral part of all development plans.
- I4 There are other reasons why there might be opposition to the development of a playing field. It may have an important landscape impact, perform the function of a strategic gap, or provide a resource for other community activities. Sport England will not normally raise objections on the basis of these issues because they are not part of our remit – but we urge local planning authorities to give them careful consideration and to recognise their significance.
- I5 The policy of Sport England is generally consistent with that which is

set out in *'The Playing Pitch Strategy'* published jointly in 1991 by the former Great Britain Sports Council, the Central Council of Physical Recreation and the National Playing Fields Association. It differs only in the definition of the specific circumstances in which Sport England will not object to proposals for development which would adversely affect a playing field. It should not be inferred that the other sponsors of *'The Playing Pitch Strategy'* have adopted any changes to the definition.

- I6 The policy is set out in this document in terms which are used in the planning system and will be readily understood by planning professionals. If you would like further explanation of the policy, and what it means in practice, please contact the nearest regional office of Sport England.

### **Definitions**

It is important to be clear about the key terms used in the policy, and how Sport England will interpret them:

- D1** “**Playing field** – the whole of a site which encompasses at least one playing pitch”.

This definition is given in the 1996 Order. Sport England’s policy is to protect all parts of a playing field, not just those which happen,

for the time being, to be laid out as pitches. This is because those other parts of a playing field are a resource which may be needed, now or in the future, and it is important that they be afforded the same protection.

- D2** “**Playing pitch** – a delineated area which, together with any run off area, is of 0.2 hectares or more, and which is used for association football, American football, rugby, cricket, hockey, lacrosse, rounders, baseball, softball, Australian football, Gaelic football, shinty, hurling, polo or cycle polo.”

This definition is also found in the 1996 Order. Golf courses, tennis courts and bowling greens are not included in the definition. Playing pitches may have a grass surface or an artificial one.

- D3** “**Catchment** – the population of individuals or teams for which a particular playing field would be considered convenient, given the nature and quality of the playing pitches which are, or might be, provided on the playing field.”

Catchment is not a simple geographic measure – it must be judged sport by sport as well as place by place. The catchment of a particular playing field will vary depending on what it can be used

for, how much use it can sustain, and how users might reach it. It will also be independent of local authority boundaries. In assessing whether there is sufficient provision the concept of catchment must be applied in this wide sense. For example, a particular playing field, which is the only one in a city on which a playing pitch for a particular sport could be laid out, would reasonably be judged as having a much greater catchment than one used for pitches which could also be found in many other places.

**D4** “**Suitable location** – a place to which those who are regular users of the playing pitches or those who may require playing pitches in the future can conveniently gain access.”

The location of playing fields in relation to those who do or might want to use them is obviously an important consideration in determining whether there is sufficient supply, but again a simple geographic spread is not the appropriate test to apply in this context. More important is how convenient it is for the regular users – the ‘home’ teams – to use the pitches which are located thereon. This will be different in different cases. For instance, if the users are predominantly juniors, or associated with an

organisation which has a headquarters nearby, then only a playing field very close by could be said to be in an appropriate location. To the members of a major sports club, who travel from a wide area, a change of location of a substantial distance may be acceptable. Accessibility by public transport may also be a relevant consideration. Sport England will consider the question of location in each case, and will apply the test of convenience depending on the circumstances. It is the users and potential users of the playing field for sport to which Sport England will apply the test of convenience, including their training and practice needs in addition to competitive play.

**D5** “**Equivalent quality** – being laid out, drained and provided with the necessary ancillary facilities so as to have the capability to provide for a similar number of matches being played and of producing playing characteristics which allow the same level of competitive play.”

For a playing field to be of equivalent quality it must be capable of providing playing pitches on which matches can be played to the same competitive standard – without any additional maintenance input. For instance, if it is proposed to provide a

playing field of equivalent quality to one on which a pitch is used by a senior county league club then the replacement must also be capable of providing for this standard of play without any additional costs being incurred over and above those which are required on the existing site. This requirement applies equally to the provision of any ancillary facilities, such as changing rooms, car parking, fencing and flooding.

the social and economic well being of the country.

**The specific circumstances are:**

**E1 A carefully quantified and documented assessment of current and future needs has demonstrated to the satisfaction of Sport England that there is an excess of playing field provision in the catchment, and the site has no special significance to the interests of sport.**

**Policy**

**P1 Sport England will oppose the granting of planning permission for any development which would lead to the loss of, or would prejudice the use of, all or any part of a playing field, or land last used as a playing field in an adopted or draft deposit local plan, unless, in the judgement of Sport England, one of the specific circumstances applies.**

E.1.1 Reason: Sport England does not seek to impose a blanket restriction on the development on playing field sites if it can be demonstrated that there is an excess of provision which would still be the case after the development of a particular site. In order to demonstrate an excess of provision the applicant, or local planning authority must produce written evidence based upon a comprehensive and carefully documented assessment of supply and demand in the catchment based upon a methodology acceptable to Sport England. This assessment should make allowance for other development for which land has been, or is likely to be, allocated in a development plan or for which planning consent has been or is likely to be granted.

P1.1 Reason: Development which would lead to the loss of all or part of a playing field, or which would prejudice its use, should not normally be permitted because it would permanently reduce the opportunities for participation in sporting activities. Government planning policy and the policies of Sport England have recognised the importance of such activities to

- E1.2 Sport England may object to the loss of a site, which has special significance, such as one of exceptional quality or importance to the development of sport, even if it can be shown that there is an excess of provision within its catchment.
- E2 The proposed development is ancillary to the principal use of the site as a playing field or playing fields, and does not affect the quantity or quality of pitches or adversely affect their use.**
- E2.1 Reason: Sport England would not normally object to the provision of new/improved changing accommodation and related facilities of an appropriate scale, providing that any detrimental effect on the principal use is not significant.
- E3 The proposed development affects only land incapable of forming, or forming part of, a playing pitch, and does not result in the loss of or inability to make use of any playing pitch (including the maintenance of adequate safety margins), a reduction in the size of the playing areas of any playing pitch or the loss of any other sporting/ancillary facilities on the site.**
- E3.1 Reason: The development of minor parts of a site (e.g. frontage land, steep slopes unsuitable for pitches) can provide a useful source of capital for sports organisations to develop their activities without detriment to the facilities. In order to avoid incremental loss of land, Sport England will use the nature and extent of provision available at any time during 1996 as a base for all assessments.
- E4 The playing field or playing fields, which would be lost as a result of the proposed development, would be replaced by a playing field or playing fields of an equivalent or better quality and of equivalent or greater quantity, in a suitable location and subject to equivalent or better management arrangements, prior to the commencement of development.**
- E4.1 Reason: There may be occasions when a replacement facility can be provided which represents an adequate substitute for, or improvement on, the existing facility and where it would be beneficial for sporting interests to take advantage of this opportunity. It would be expected that the replacement facility is secured by way of a legal agreement between the applicant and the planning

authority, and that it will be available for use prior to the commencement of any development. Sport England will not apply this exception unless the management arrangements for the new site are equivalent to or better than those for the site to be developed.

**E5 The proposed development is for an indoor or outdoor sports facility, the provision of which would be of sufficient benefit to the development of sport as to outweigh the detriment caused by the loss of the playing field or playing fields.**

E5.1 Reason: There may be occasions when the development of a facility for sport, whether involving the construction of indoor facilities or a change in the use of open land, would lead to the loss of all or part of a playing field. If Sport England is satisfied that the development proposal represents an opportunity to obtain benefits for sport which are, in its judgement, unlikely to be obtainable in any other way in the foreseeable future, and that the benefits which will be obtained will outweigh any predictable detriment to sporting interests caused by the loss of playing fields, then it may not object to the proposed development.

## Conclusion

Letting us know about proposals

C1 If there are proposals to develop land which is, or has recently been used as playing fields, we would like to be informed, even if a planning application has not yet been made. You can contact your Sport England regional office on the number given overleaf – ask to speak to the officer who deals with planning matters. Although we cannot prevent proposals coming forward, or planning consent being granted, we will seek information, offer advice and make our views known at the appropriate time. Please remember, we are concerned with the sporting use of playing fields. The National Playing Field Association will be able to offer you information and advice about related matters such as children's play and open space – their number is also shown overleaf.

**Sport England Addresses**

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