

Investment and Rationalisation of Playing Pitch sites in Stockton-on-Tees

1. Introduction

The traditional approach to providing playing pitches needs to be challenged. An approach which enables all clubs/ teams to play their games at their traditional chosen pitch location and time each week is one that is becoming increasingly unsustainable. With depleting budgets many local authorities are being forced to take extremely tough decisions relating to their leisure portfolio with sports and leisure facilities and services.

Stockton-on-Tees the Council continues to be progressive in recognising the role that sport and active leisure play in the individual and collective health and prosperity of the community. Investment in leisure and sports facilities and events over the past decade has been extremely significant given the financial backdrop that all LA's are facing. Examples include Billingham Forum, Air-Trail and the 2016 British Cycling National Championships with the emerging plans for Ingleby Barwick demonstrating the Council's ongoing commitment to sport and active leisure.

However in order to develop financially robust plans for investing in new facilities, the Council also has to reduce costs and bring in additional investment to support strategically important leisure facilities. As such land that once formed playing pitches but no longer does so comes under scrutiny as potential sites where development might take place in exchange for a capital receipt that can be reinvested into a range of council projects, including new leisure facilities and improving existing ones. We are however mindful that we must protect the integrity of our playing pitch provision and ensure that our clubs/ teams have quality and accessible places to play.

The current and anticipated future financial position of local authorities means that it cannot be business as usual and clubs/ teams as well as the Council need to evolve and face the reality of fewer but better facilities in the future based around flexible programming.

This position is congruent with the FA's vision for grass roots football. Recognising the financial pressures of LA's and the lack of available investment for traditional playing pitch sites, the FA through 'The Chairman's England Commission' are placing a greater emphasis on the role

of Artificial Grass Pitches (AGP's) for the provision of mini and youth football matches. They aim is to see 50% of all mini and youth football played on high quality accredited AGP's by 2020. This is an outcome we are keen to work with the FA to achieve particularly as the identified shortfall in grass pitch provision in Stockton-on-Tees is in mini and youth football.

Another reason for greater consideration about the role of AGP's is in the fact that football is increasingly becoming a year round game for mini and youth footballers putting an additional strain on the already well-used playing pitch stock . This year-round approach to football is not sustainable without a radical rethink about where this football takes place and the greater need to deploy AGP's on the basis of both quality and sustainability.

Currently in Stockton the general picture is of modest under-provision of mini-soccer and youth football although this shortfall in available pitches is forecast to increase with more young people taking up the game. However this is also at a time when we have seen significant expansion in our stock of quality and accredited AGP's with more in the planning process. The AGP's are at the following locations:

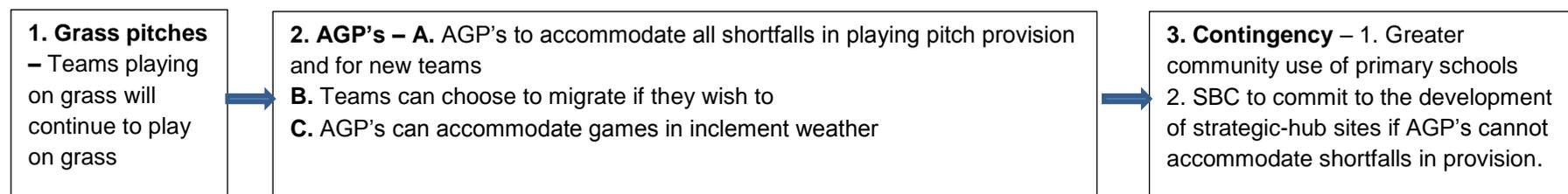
Table 1.

Facility Location	Type of Facility	Sub-Area
Conyers School	3G (Full size/ Floodlit)	Eaglescliffe and Yarm
Stockton 6 th Form College	3G (Full size/ Floodlit)	Central and Western
Northshore Academy	3G (Full size/ Floodlit)	Central and Western
Bede College	3G (Full size/ Floodlit)	Billingham & North Stockton
Northfield School	3G (Full size/ Floodlit)	Billingham & North Stockton
Billingham Rugby Club (in planning – to be funded by the RFU)	3G (Full size/ Floodlit/ Rugby)	Billingham & North Stockton

In some areas such as in Sunderland and the Russell Foster Junior League, clubs/ teams travel to central venues to play their games and this is very much the in line with the vision that the FA has for improving the quality of provision for mini and youth football.

However within the Tees Valley where the TJFA (the biggest junior league in Europe) is the orchestrator of junior football, teams have traditionally played home and away with many clubs occupying sites that have had sizeable funding injections including from the Football Foundation. As such a future based around the wholesale change of the home/ away format to central venues is not in the interests of many of the clubs and rather than challenge this we need to accept it as a variable with which we must work.

The opportunity for football in Stockton-on-Tees is to create a hybrid model that provides clubs with choice and facility providers such as the Council with a more sustainable approach to facility provision. The approach in support of the FA for 2016-2020 is as follows:



The plan for 2016-2020 will be reviewed on an annual basis.

Sub Area Plans – How under-supply will be accommodated in each of the sub areas

Table 2.

Sub Area	Current unmet Demand	Future unmet Demand	Change in Practices	Migration Opportunity (AGP's)	Disposal Sites	Contingency Plan
Billingham and North Stockton	A. +5 Y. -2 M. -2	A. +2 Y. -9 M. -5.5	In line with the FA Chairman's England Commission, SBC will support the FA to migrate up to 50% of Mini and Youth Football onto AGP's by 2020.	Clubs to utilise the AGP facilities at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Northfield School Bede College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Campus School (part disposal) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate greater relationships between junior football clubs and primary schools Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created at: The former Norton School & Bluehall Recreation Ground – Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created (sites to be confirmed)

Billingham and North Stockton considerations – This sub area has sufficient adult pitches (including a surplus) both now and anticipated for the future. The mini-soccer and youth provision in relation to grass pitches is less positive. However with two (soon to be three) AGP's in the sub area, it is reasonable to assume that this lack of provision in grass pitches can be met by a combination of a) remarking of surplus adult pitches and b) migration to AGP's in line with the FA's objective of having 50% of mini-soccer and youth football played on AGP's by 2020 and c) closer working relationships with primary schools to meet under-supply in mini-soccer.

Table 3.

Sub Area	Current unmet Demand	Future unmet Demand	Change in Practices	Migration Opportunity (AGP's)	Disposal Sites	Contingency Plan (preliminary sites to be confirmed)
Central and	A. +6 Y. +3.5	A. +4.5 Y. -7.5	In line with the FA Chairman's	Clubs to utilise the AGP facilities at:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Former Blakeston 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate greater relationships between

Western	M. +2.5	M. -8.5	England Commission, SBC will support the FA to migrate up to 50% of Mini and Youth Football onto AGP's by 2020.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stockton 6th Form College Northshore Academy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Education Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> junior football clubs and primary schools Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created at: The former Norton School & Bluehall Recreation Ground – Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created (sites to be confirmed)
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Central and Western considerations – This sub area has sufficient adult pitches (including a surplus) both now and anticipated for the future. The mini-soccer and youth provision in relation to grass pitches is also positive currently but less positive going forwards. However with two AGP's in the sub area, it is reasonable to assume that this lack of provision in grass pitches can be met by a combination of a) remarking of surplus adult pitches and b) migration to AGP's in line with the FA's objective of having 50% of mini-soccer and youth football played on AGP's by 2020 and c) closer working relationships with primary schools to meet under-supply in mini-soccer.

Table 4.

Sub Area	Current unmet Demand	Future unmet Demand	Change in Practices	Development of New Sites	Migration Opportunity (AGP's)	Disposal Sites	Contingency Plan (preliminary sites to be confirmed)
Eaglescliffe and Yarm	A. +1.5 Y. -1.5 M. -3.5	A. +1.5 Y. -3 M. -7.5	In line with the FA Chairman's England Commission, SBC will support the FA to migrate up to 50% of Mini and Youth Football onto AGP's by 2020.	The development of the former Saltergill School site as a min-soccer centre (with 3-pitches) that will benefit the community and primarily Leven Athletic Junior FC.	Clubs to utilise the AGP facilities at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conyers School 	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate greater relationships between junior football clubs and primary schools Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created at: The former Norton School & Bluehall Recreation Ground

							– Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created (sites to be confirmed)
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Eaglescliffe and Yarm considerations – This sub area has sufficient adult pitches (including a surplus) both now and anticipated for the future. The mini-soccer and youth provision in relation to grass pitches is less positive. However with one AGP in the sub area and the development of the former Saltergill School site into a mini-soccer centre (3 pitch site), it is reasonable to assume that this lack of provision in grass pitches can be met by a combination of a) the new mini-soccer site at the former Saltergill School and b) migration to AGP's in line with the FA's objective of having 50% of mini-soccer and youth football played on AGP's by 2020 and c) closer working relationships with primary schools to meet under-supply in mini-soccer.

Table 5.

Sub Area	Current unmet Demand	Future unmet Demand	Change in Practices	Migration Opportunity (AGP's)	Disposal Sites	Contingency Plan (preliminary sites to be confirmed)
South East	A. +2 Y. -0.5 M. 0	A. +0.5 Y. -2.5 M. -2	In line with the FA Chairman's England Commission, SBC will support the FA to migrate up to 50% of Mini and Youth Football onto AGP's by 2020.	No AGP's in this sub-area Clubs to utilise the AGP facilities within Eaglescliffe and Yarm and/ or the Central and Western Areas	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate greater relationships between junior football clubs and primary schools Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created at: The former Norton School & Bluehall Recreation Ground – Mini-Soccer/ Youth hub created (sites to be confirmed)

South East considerations – This sub area has sufficient adult pitches (including a surplus) both now and anticipated for the future. The mini-soccer and youth provision in relation to grass pitches is currently acceptable. However as the perceived future demand leads to a small

undersupply of mini and youth pitches, it is assumed that this could be dealt with through migration of some mini and youth activity to AGP's in line with the FA's objective of having 50% of mini-soccer and youth football played on AGP's by 2020 and c) closer working relationships with primary schools to meet under-supply in mini-soccer.

Key: A. denotes Adult/ Y. denotes Youth/ M. denotes Mini/ + denotes surplus/ - denotes deficit

Contingency Planning

Although SBC anticipate that the AGP stock will be able to accommodate both undersupply now and in the future, we have developed a contingency plan should AGP's not be able to do so.

1. Greater working with Primary School sites to meet the needs of mini-soccer expansion

There are 72 primary schools within Stockton-on-Tees, most with grassed playing field areas, with a great many having little or no community use of their sports facilities. SBC will work with the schools, the School Sports Partnership and the FA to explore how schools might add to the playing pitch jigsaw and what additional benefits the schools might gain from sharing their facilities with community football teams.

2. Developing contingency hub sites for the borough

SBC believe that future migration of mini-soccer and youth football to AGP's in line with FA's strategic vision for improving quality will alleviate the under supply in playing pitch provision. However as this cannot be proved until the theory of migration becomes practice, SBC have identified potential strategic hub sites specifically for mini-soccer and youth football. However SBC will not undertake development of these hub sites until demand has been established in the future. It would clearly to be financially irresponsible to develop such contingency sites until we know whether or not the demand exists for them. As such as this stage we will simply identify the sites and make a commitment as a local authority to commit to the required investment to bring them into use should they be required in the future.

As identified in Tables 2-5 the sites which form part of the preliminary contingency plan are:

- Norton School – currently unused site which was the playing field for the former Norton Secondary School – Could be utilised as a hub site catering for mini-soccer and youth football demand that exceeds supply
- Blue Hall Recreation Ground – Former playing pitch site which is currently unused due to the lack of amenities – Could be utilised as a site to accommodate mini-soccer and youth football if future demand exceeds supply

Balancing Need v's Preference

In developing and implementing sustainable plans for football in the borough, SBC will be guided by the governing body whilst also being mindful about the need to reduce the costs of providing football (due to a more negative financial position for LA's). As such SBC will work with the FA, Leagues and Clubs to establish a realistic and workable way forward.

We are aware that it is the preference of some football clubs to play only on grass and we need to be clear from the outset that in providing sufficient provision, an FA mandate and available budgets going forward necessitate a mixed economy of pitch provision which could include a) existing grass pitches b) new grass pitches via other providers, e.g. primary schools and c) much greater use of AGP's.

Adult migration from grass onto AGP

Although the FA's plan is to migrate 50% of mini and junior football onto AGP's, SBC also plans to work with the adult leagues in Stockton-on-Tees to explore alternative models of adult football delivery which might move away from the traditional Sunday mornings. With the perception of even wetter winters and more games being cancelled, a model which enables teams theoretically play their fixtures on AGP's (which all have floodlights) over a seven day period is worthy of serious exploration. This model may lead to greater costs per player but the quality of experience would be significantly enhanced and the flexibility may create a situation where more footballers are able to play (some players with children find it difficult to commit to Sunday mornings but may have less of an issue at e.g. 8pm on a Wednesday evening).

Conclusion

SBC has a plan to ensure we have an adequate supply of quality and accessible playing pitches across the borough. This involves protecting key sites that are currently used and in line with the FA creating greater usage of AGP's particularly for mini-soccer and youth football. However in ensuring we will always have enough pitch provision (grass/ AGP) we are also developing contingency plans to ensure that additional sites will be brought into use should the need for them arise.