



WIGAN BOROUGH PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2017

QUALITY, INTEGRITY, PROFESSIONALISM

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This is the executive summary for the Wigan Borough Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS). Both the accompanying Strategy and Action Plan and the preceding Assessment Report have been produced in accordance with Sport England guidance. The study covers the period up to 2026, in line with the Wigan Local Plan.

Scope

The project provides guidance and support in order to understand and assess the need for playing pitches in Wigan Borough. It provides a strategic framework for the maintenance and improvement of existing provision and covers the following sports:

- ◀ Football pitches
- ◀ Cricket pitches
- ◀ Rugby union pitches
- ◀ Rugby league pitches
- ◀ Hockey pitches (sand/water based AGPs)
- ◀ Third generation turf pitches (3G pitches)
- ◀ Other grass sports pitches (i.e. American football and Touch)

Study area

For the purpose of this analysis, Wigan Borough has been broken down into three analysis areas. They are: Ashton, Wigan (town) and Leigh. The analysis areas fit in line with the Council's new community strategy and ward based plans to support the Council's ambition to provide Wigan residents with access to high quality sport facilities at a neighbourhood level.

Vision

A vision has been set out to provide a clear focus with desired outcomes for the PPS which seeks to support the Council and its partners.

“An accessible, high quality and sustainable network of sports pitches and other outdoor sports facilities that supports delivery of the Deal for the Future (promoting community self-reliance, increasing the health and wellbeing of residents and communities, providing opportunities for young people and fostering belief in the Borough) through increased sports participation by all residents, at all levels of play, from grassroots to elite”

Aims

The following overarching aims and their associated recommendations are considered key. These are based on three Sport England themes:

- ◀ To **protect** the existing supply of playing pitches where it is needed for meeting current and future needs.
 - ◀ Ensure, through use of the PPS, that playing pitches are protected through implementation of local planning policy.

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- ◀ Secure tenure and access to sites for high quality, development minded clubs through a range of solutions and partnership agreements.
- ◀ Maximise community use of education facilities where needed.
- ◀ To **enhance** playing fields, pitches and ancillary facilities through improving quality and management of sites.
 - ◀ Improve quality.
 - ◀ Adopt a tiered approach (hierarchy of provision) to the management and improvement of sites).
 - ◀ Work in partnership with stakeholders to secure funding.
 - ◀ Secure development contributions or Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).
- ◀ To **provide** new playing pitches where there is current or future demand to do so.
 - ◀ Identify opportunities to add to the overall stock to accommodate current and future demand.
 - ◀ Rectify quantitative shortfalls through the current pitch stock.

Overall conclusions

The existing position for all pitch sports is either demand is currently being met or there is a shortfall. For football, there is evidence of current spare capacity, however, when factoring future demand this becomes a position of shortfall for all pitch formats except adult football. The future position for other sports including rugby union and rugby league shows exacerbation of current shortfalls.

As such, there is a need to protect all existing playing pitch provision until demand is met. Some shortfalls can be reduced through increased access to existing provision, for example, increased certification and use of 3G pitches for competitive football, rugby union or rugby league match play would create new capacity to reduce future grass pitch shortfalls currently unavailable due to compliancy.

Sport-by-sport recommendations

A number of relevant scenarios have been tested against key issues for each sport, resulting in the recommendations below. These recommendations are not solely for Wigan Council to action, nor do they imply an expectation that Wigan Council will, or can afford to make the necessary investments required. Rather, the purpose of the recommendations is to guide investment for any relevant bodies, including but not limited to Sport England and the NGBs for the sports the recommendations refer to.

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Football

Current supply of football pitch provision is insufficient with shortfalls evident at youth 9v9, mini 7v7 and mini 5v5 pitch types, though capacity exists on adult and youth 11v11 pitches.

When considering future demand, there will be shortfalls for all pitch types except adult pitches. However, given the nature of mini and junior leagues in the area, some of this future demand may be able to be accommodated on certified 3G pitches.

- ◀ Existing quantity of football pitches to be protected, except for where low value/single pitch sites are considered suitable and feasible to be lost for development on the condition that re-provision of playing field land elsewhere represents a preferable and greater benefit to sport.
- ◀ Seek to develop sustainable, multi-pitch football hubs including onsite 3G pitch provision to create an all-in-one football offer capable of servicing team training, short-formats and non-traditional participation and match play across grass and certified 3G pitches.
- ◀ Where pitches are overplayed and rated as standard or poor quality, prioritise investment and review maintenance regimes to ensure it is of an appropriate standard to sustain/improve pitch quality.
- ◀ Look to utilise actual spare capacity expressed on sites in order to cater for existing and future demand including overplay. This may require improvements to pitch quality and is explored on a site by site basis within the accompanying action plan.
- ◀ Consider potential and feasibility for asset transfer or long-term leasehold to clubs which express interest and are considered realistically able to sustain and maintain sporting provision as required, allowing for greater opportunities to access external funding streams for facility development.
- ◀ Seek to increase use of 3G pitches in order to increase capacity available to address future shortfalls and review impact on grass pitches as part of the PPS Annual Review.
- ◀ Determine sites with key qualitative issues which may benefit most from technical assessment and a composed bespoke programme of works through the FA Pitch Improvement Programme.
- ◀ Improve, provide and increase access to changing facilities which serve grass football pitches. Ensure any works ensure suitability for female and disability access to facilitate increased formats of football.
- ◀ Seek to secure community use through formal agreement and/or the planning process should there be development of new football pitch provision.
- ◀ Ensure adequate provision for increased demand generated by housing developments, secured through appropriately calculated developer contributions.
- ◀ The FA and County FAs to work closely with the Bury and Bolton Junior Football League and the Council to manage the impact of summer football on grass pitches and develop a planned approach to summer use and remediation of football provision.

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3G pitches

Supply and demand analysis highlights that Wigan Borough has insufficient supply of full sized 3G pitches to meet current and future demand, based on the FA training model and the multitude of sports which also require access to 3G pitch provision.

This shortfall equates to five full sized 3G pitches based on present demand,

- ◀ Explore opportunities to create multi-pitch (potentially multi-sport) hub sites where 3G provision is able to support grass pitches as a broader, sustainable, all-in-one community offer, for example through (but not limited to) the FA Parklife Programme.
- ◀ Ensure current supply is maintained regularly and rigorously as required to ensure continued quality for use and ensure they are of sufficient quality to pass performance standing testing or certification renewal.
- ◀ Retain all certified 3G pitches on the respective sporting registers and ensure certification of each is renewed through performance standard testing so to maintain the level of 3G capacity available to accommodate demand from different sports.
- ◀ Seek to maximise use of capacity where available at weekends to accommodate match play in order to reduce grass pitch shortfalls, particularly at Robin Park Arena Sports & Tennis Centre and Howe Bridge Leisure Centre which have relatively low levels of weekend use.
- ◀ Should any new 3G pitches be built, seek to secure access through usage agreements where possible as a condition of partnership investment or planning conditions.
- ◀ Should any new 3G pitches be built, ensure they are constructed to required specifications and to meet FA recommended rather than minimum dimensions where land footprint allows, so to maximise opportunities for use for all formats of competitive play.
- ◀ Encourage providers to have a mechanism in place which ensures the long-term sustainability of provision, such as an adequate sinking fund for repairs or resurfacing formed over time.
- ◀ Through the creation of new full sized 3G pitches, consider options to deliver a wide variety of football opportunities, including new formats of competitive football such as central venue midweek flexi and Vets leagues, as well as walking football and female development centres.
- ◀ Should any new 3G pitches be built, consider potential to certify for competitive use by sports additional to football as part of a shared scheme, for example to reduce shortfalls for rugby union or rugby league.
- ◀ Seek World Rugby recertification of the pitch at Robin Park Arena & Tennis Centre for use for both training to reduce current levels of overplay and matches to protect pitch quality, particularly through periods of notably poor weather. Retesting also presents opportunity to achieve RFL Community Standard certification to make capacity available for rugby league use to help reduce grass pitch shortfalls.
- ◀ Should FA Parklife Programme investment not be pursued by Wigan Council in order to develop new 3G pitch provision, investigate feasibility to extend and convert to 3G the small sized sand based AGPs which exist at schools and are dated, as a means to reduce current full sized 3G pitch shortfalls for football training.

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Cricket

There is presently sufficient supply of cricket provision to accommodate peak time demand both for senior and junior cricket, notwithstanding overplay at some individual sites.

However, there is no actual spare capacity at senior peak time (Saturday) to accommodate future growth. Forecasted senior growth is minimal and amounts to only one team. This team could potentially be accommodated at Westleigh Methodists CC (albeit in another analysis area and may not be operational again until the 2019 season), or could be accommodated on Sundays.

There is sufficient supply of provision to accommodate junior cricket both now and in the future, though there is a need to access additional capacity (either natural turf or non-turf) for junior play at some individual overplayed sites to alleviate overplay.

- ◀ Existing quantity of cricket pitches to be protected.
- ◀ Seek to improve poor quality facilities for matches and training, such as the poor quality outfield at Wigan Sports Club and deteriorated net training bays at Spring View Cricket Club.
- ◀ Support clubs such as Wigan CC and Orrell Red Triangle CC with aspirations to improve and extend ancillary provision including access to external funding opportunities where possible and available.
- ◀ Maintain and improve pitch quality through rigorous and regular maintenance, remedial and preparatory work, ensuring that clubs have sufficient access to the required equipment in order to do so.
- ◀ Work with clubs and leagues towards permitting use of NTPs for matches beyond U11 age cricket and seek to make greater use of NTPs to alleviate overuse at club sites.
- ◀ Deliver the new All Stars Cricket programme and seek to increase junior participation as a result.
- ◀ Consider opportunities to increase NTP provision in parks and public spaces should recreational and short format demand be identified.
- ◀ Support the development of a new cricket ground at Winstanley Community Sports Centre for Winstanley Park CC and ensure provision offers sufficient capacity to accommodate current demand and allows for future growth.
- ◀ Continue to deliver and develop talent development pathways, including the LCB South Asian Talent Search.

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Rugby union

Current supply is not sufficient to cater for the level of demand expressed in Wigan at present, totalling a need for a further 5.5 match equivalent sessions on senior pitches. This is further exacerbated to create a future requirement for 8.5 match equivalent sessions.

- ◀ Existing quantity of rugby union pitches to be protected or mitigated/reprovided suitably meeting National Planning Policy where proposed for or at risk of loss.
- ◀ Where viable and demand is evidenced from clubs stating that they will pay and use 3G pitches, test/register existing 3G pitches built to World Rugby compliant specifications to feature on the RFU World Rugby certified pitch register. This includes renewal of the certification at Robin Park Sports & Tennis Centre which though has no spare capacity midweek, does so at weekends for example to accommodate mini training or match play.
- ◀ Renegotiate the lease agreement at Aspull Civic Centre Playing Fields due to expire in 2021 to secure long-term use of the two senior pitches. Consider potential for community asset transfer as a means of securing the entire site offer where land ownership is presently varied, should the Club express desire to do so and evidence capability to sustain the asset in future.
- ◀ Support the development of new rugby union pitch and ancillary provision at Winstanley Community Sports Centre to current RFU specifications where possible and explore opportunities to access external grant funding to assist the development of facilities.
- ◀ Similarly, support Leigh RUFC with initial plans to develop new rugby union pitch provision at Carr Lane and secure Section 106 investment as mitigation of the pitches to be lost at Thames Avenue, giving consideration to feasibility to install floodlighting as part of the pitch development.
- ◀ Improve pitch quality through improved and more regular maintenance and remedial, particularly at Aspull Civic Centre Playing Fields and St Georges Park where maintenance level improvements are able to eliminate all or the majority of overplay. This is especially required at the former where floodlit training provision (both pitch and training area) is reportedly such poor quality in winter that training is relocated offsite at cost to Aspull RFC.
- ◀ Seek to develop a wholistic strategy to addressing overplay and balancing rugby union and rugby league demand at Bankes Playing Fields in conjunction with the RFL, Council and resident clubs.
- ◀ Consider feasibility to floodlight the third pitch at Wigan RUFC so that all are then floodlit either fully or partially, in order to allow for capacity available to be used for training to balance usage across the three pitches. This would also help facilitate evening matches on Friday nights.
- ◀ Seek to improve changing provision at Aspull Civic Centre Playing Fields (including structural issues and hot water provision) and Wigan RUFC where quality is reported to be poor.
- ◀ As part of potential development of football hubs through the Parklife Programme, consider if appropriate any opportunities for cross-sport 3G pitch certification, including World Rugby certification for training use or mini match play.

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Rugby league

Current supply of senior, junior and primary grass rugby league pitches is not sufficient to cater for the level of demand expressed in Wigan Borough at present. This is further exacerbated when considering anticipated future demand.

Causal factors of overplay include significant levels of demand for midweek training and weekend match play, limited maintenance regimes and limited carrying capacity as a result of poor quality pitches, in some cases combining factors leading to overplay of pitches.

- ◀ Protect quality of existing rugby league pitch provision.
- ◀ Seek increased certification of 3G pitches as RFL Community Standard compliant in order to increase floodlit capacity available to accommodate training. This could include shared schemes through the development of football hubs.
- ◀ Seek to improve pitch quality through improved and more regular maintenance and remediation.
- ◀ Work with clubs to transfer some training demand from match pitches, either to other grass training areas or RFL Community Standard 3G pitch provision, in order to reduce levels of overplay on pitches and lessen impact on maintenance works undertaken.
- ◀ Support the development of new rugby league pitch provision, for example the new Vicarage Lane site in Shevington.
- ◀ Consider opportunities for community asset transfer where rugby league clubs express desire and evidence ability to feasibly manage, sustain and improve provision, including Woodhouse Playing Fields (Wigan Bulldogs ARLFC) and Bankes Playing Fields.
- ◀ Seek to make rugby league clubs more sustainable and develop revenue generation streams which aid to do so. Consider potential for asset transfer or leasehold of facilities to clubs which are feasibly able to sustain and improve the asset and explore opportunities to access external funding to help do so should this be the case.
- ◀ Continue to develop women and girls' participation in clubs and schools so that in future whole Wigan based teams can be formed.

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Hockey pitches (AGPs)

The current supply of hockey suitable AGPs is considered insufficient to accommodate the current level of hockey demand both at peak time, despite ability to meet midweek (including for training) requirements and anticipated future growth in participation.

In conclusion, there is a need to retain all three full sized hockey AGPs in the short term. Though presently unused for hockey (albeit available for community use and used for football), Standish Community High School should be retained in the short term as the site represents the only reserve capacity to accommodate Wigan HC should the AGP at The Deanery High School be condemned as unsafe for use. Further to this, it is also an option to accommodate users from Westleigh High School (undersized AGP for hockey).

- ◀ Retain all full sized hockey suitable AGPs as hockey suitable surfaces, as well as Westleigh High School unless Leigh HC and Manchester HC can be suitably and agreeably accommodate elsewhere on a full sized AGP.
- ◀ Resurface the AGP at The Deanery C of E High School as a key priority to be retained as a hockey suitable surface.
- ◀ Establish opportunities to access additional capacity for hockey should any new hockey suitable AGPs be created. Should this happen, seek to secure community use for hockey through formal usage agreements.
- ◀ Seek to maximise use of capacity freed up from anticipated transfer of football training demand to 3G pitches in order to grow hockey participation.
- ◀ Increase participation driven through community clubs and schools.
- ◀ Secure increased access to midweek and non-peak time capacity to allow for both growth in training demand and development and delivery of alternative hockey formats, such as short format matches/leagues and less formal participation based sessions.
- ◀ Maintain AGPs regularly and to the standard required to preserve quality for performance. Monitor quality and rate of natural deterioration and seek resurfacing when required so not to impact on hockey use.
- ◀ Encourage providers to put in place a mechanism for sustainability such as a sinking fund, (formed by periodically setting aside money over time ready for surface repair or replacement when required) in place to maintain AGP pitch quality in the long term

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Touch

There is presently insufficient pitch provision to cater for demand from the two ET affiliated touch clubs in Wigan.

Level of use at Bankes Playing Fields (touch sessions are combined with rugby league training) is not sustainable and additional capacity is required as a whole for rugby league, rugby union and touch use onsite.

Since the touch pitch at Standish high School is no longer marked and maintained, there demand for a specifically marked touch pitch for use by Wigan Touch Warriors.

- ◀ Develop touch participation in the Borough through greater engagement with the two clubs and England Touch, including outreach to the potential latent market amongst rugby league and rugby union clubs.
- ◀ Engage with Wigan Touch Warriors and consider potential sites within the Wigan Town Area where a touch pitch could be formally marked to create a venue from which the club can be based in the longer term.
- ◀ Alongside the RFL and RFU, develop a wholistic solution to reducing overplay across rugby union and rugby league pitches, presently due to use from touch and both rugby codes.
- ◀ Explore potential sites suitable and available to temporarily accommodate multiple touch pitches so that Wigan Touch Warriors may be able to host a tournament in the Borough as previously desired.
- ◀ Explore potential to link with clubs to deliver community touch sessions through the Inspiring Healthy Lifestyles Trust as a way of developing touch as a sport suitable and able to engage a range of participants including older adults, women and girls.

American football

Overall, current demand for flag American football is able to be catered for by existing playing field provision.

- ◀ Develop American football participation in the Borough through greater engagement with Wigan Warhawks.
- ◀ Support the Club with access to suitable venues and ensure use of other playing pitch provision is sustainable without impacting on quality.

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Delivering the Strategy

The PPS seeks to provide guidance for maintenance/management decisions and investment made across Wigan Borough. By addressing the issues identified in the Assessment Report and using the strategic framework presented in the Strategy, the current and future sporting and recreational needs of Wigan Borough can be satisfied.

It is important that there is regular annual monitoring and review against the actions identified in the Strategy. This monitoring should be led by the local authority and supported by all members of the steering group. As a guide, if no review and subsequent update has been carried out within three years, Sport England and the NGBs would consider the PPS and the information on which it is based to be out of date.