

Belfast Playing Pitches and Outdoor Sport Facilities Strategy 2026-2036

www.belfastcity.gov.uk

Belfast City Council

Contents

Foreward 3

1 Introduction 4

2 Key Achievements 6

3 Strategic Context 8

Strategic vision, aims and priorities ---------- 9

Scope ---------- 9

Regional context ---------- 10

Strategic factors to consider ---------- 10

4 Key Findings Data, Research and Intelligence: Methodology 12

5 Overview of current supply and demand 16

6 Improvement Plan 18

Foreward

Belfast has a proud sporting heritage — from grassroots clubs that have been at the heart of communities for generations, to international successes that have placed our athletes and teams on the world stage. Sport here is more than recreation; it is part of our identity and culture and central to the health and wellbeing of many. Across Belfast, thousands of people take part in sport and physical activity every week, supported by a vibrant network of clubs, volunteers, schools, and governing bodies.

In recent years, the sporting landscape has continued to evolve — with growing participation across genders and age groups, the rise of new and emerging sports, and a renewed focus on inclusion, wellbeing, and sustainability.

Sport and physical activity play a vital role in the life of our city — bringing people together, supporting health and wellbeing, and helping to build stronger and better connected communities. As Belfast continues to grow and evolve, so too must the spaces and facilities that enable people of all ages and abilities to be active, play, and compete.

The Belfast Playing Pitches and Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy sets out a shared vision for how we can plan, invest in, and manage our outdoor sporting spaces over the coming years, in line with our Belfast Agenda outcomes. It provides a framework to ensure that high quality, accessible, and sustainable facilities are available across the city, from local parks and school grounds to major sporting hubs. It also focuses on equality to represent the diversification of facility users in recent years and the environment, to ensure we make the most of new and advancing technologies when developing new and existing facilities.

This strategy has been developed in partnership with clubs, governing bodies, schools, community organisations and the wider community, reflecting our collective commitment to improving opportunities for participation. It also recognises the changing patterns of sport and recreation, the pressures on urban space, and the importance of designing facilities that are inclusive, adaptable, and environmentally responsible.

Working together with a range of stakeholders will be key to successful delivery. Together, we aim to create a network of outdoor sports spaces that inspire participation, nurture talent, and enhance the health and wellbeing of everyone in Belfast — now and for generations to come.

Councillor Jenna Maghie

Chair of the People and Communities Committee

1 Introduction

1.1 We are the largest provider of outdoor sports facilities in the Belfast area. In 2011 we developed our first Playing Pitch Strategy, which has guided much of the work to improve and develop sports pitches and outdoor sports facilities.

1.2 The Belfast Playing Pitches and Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy 2026 – 2036 builds on the progress made since 2011. It supports Belfast's wider Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy and sets out our vision for high quality, accessible and sustainable outdoor sports provision for the city.

1.3 This strategy is based on extensive research and consultation. It recognises the progress made since 2011, while also acknowledging the ongoing challenges. Demand for sports facilities continues to be higher than the available supply. This is driven by demographic change, increased interest in outdoor sport following the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising participation rates, especially among women and young people. It also highlights the gaps in underrepresented groups being able to access our provision.

To meet growing demand and the evolving needs of sports clubs, a strategic, coordinated approach is needed. This will help ensure fair and equitable access to our playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities, while also supporting our plan to continue to develop and build facilities across the city.

1.4 This strategy supports the six strategic priorities of the Belfast Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy 2026:

- Strategic Priority 1: Physical Activity and the Participation Journey
- Strategic Priority 2: Sport Development
- Strategic Priority 3: Collaborative Partnerships
- Strategic Priority 4: Accessibility
- Strategic Priority 5: Physical Activity Facilities
- Strategic Priority 6: Resources

1.5 The improvement plan will focus capital investment on three key strategic priorities:

Strategic Priority 3: Collaborative Partnerships

Why this is a strategic priority

Working closely with city partners will help create a more strategic and collaborative approach to delivering physical activity and sport development opportunities. By working together, resources will be better coordinated and invested, and shared goals can be achieved.

Objective

To develop strong citywide strategic and collaborative partnership that support the delivery of the identified physical activity and sport development priorities.

Strategic Priority 5: Physical Activity Facilities

Why this is a strategic priority

Future investment in physical activity facilities is a priority to ensure those who are already active can continue to participate using good quality places and spaces, and those who will become active have access to inclusive, fit for purpose provision aligned to identified priorities, prioritised and planned investment and appropriate resourcing.

Objective

To ensure suitable and sufficient facilities across the city, encouraging greater levels of participation in sport and physical activity.

Strategic Priority 6: Resources

Why this is a strategic priority

To deliver identified physical activity priorities, there is a need for resources to be aligned to People, Capital and Revenue.

Objective

To ensure resources are aligned with our vision and strategic priorities for physical activity and sports development.

1.6 This strategy aims to embrace innovation, sustainable design, as well as environmental and inclusive development models. It aims to respond to urban growth, shifting demographics, and evolving participation trends.

The strategy seeks to improve access to facilities and reduce barriers for underrepresented groups. Through long term investment, it aims to provide the facilities needed by both current and future generations. It reflects our commitment to ensuring outdoor sport is embedded within Belfast's culture – so that we meet our overarching Belfast's Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy vision:

"Our inclusively active city: where, throughout the life course, everyone is able to take part in sport and physical activity, to benefit their health and well-being"

1.7 Our service provision in Belfast is centred around our residents. Listening to residents and understanding their needs is essential in developing and delivering this strategy. This strategy also recognises that no single organisation can meet the city's needs alone. Working collectively with governing bodies, the education sector, community groups, clubs, government departments and external funders will be critical to maximising resources, and delivering quality, high impact, community centred solutions.

1.8 As Belfast continues to grow, the spaces where people can play sport, compete, socialise and stay active must grow too. This strategy demonstrates our renewed commitment to creating a city where outdoor sport is woven into everyday life, supporting healthier individuals, stronger communities, and a more vibrant, resilient Belfast.

1.9 We are inviting our key partners including governing bodies, schools, community organisations and funders, to work with us to turn this strategy into reality. By working together, aligning resources, sharing knowledge and expertise, and embracing innovation, we can transform the sporting landscape of our city.

2 Key Achievements

2.1 The first Playing Pitch Strategy (2011-2021) delivered a **£15 million**, 10 year investment plan that transformed grassroots sports provision across Belfast. It resulted in:

- Nine new pavilions
- Five new pitches
- £750,000 of improvements on education sector sites, improving access for local communities after school hours.

2.2 Since the strategy completion in 2021 we have continued working with key strategic partners and have delivered significant achievements in the development and improvement of sports facilities across the city. Approximately **£40 million** has been invested in new and upgraded facilities across the city, including:

- Belfast Investment Fund - **£5.4 million** investment delivered to date:
  - H&W Welders - new 3G pitch, stand, and floodlighting.
  - Colin Glen Trust - development of new 3G pitches and an all-weather sports dome.
  - Hanwood Trust site – upgrade of synthetic pitch and floodlights.
  - Davitts GAC - new GAA pitch, spectator stand, pavilion, flood lit Multi Use Games Area (MUGA).
  - Bredagh GAC - refurbishment of existing building to create a purpose-built community hub.
- Belfast Investment Fund has also committed a further **£2.86 million** to projects to improve facilities for Grove Utd FC and Belvoir FC.

2.3 Under the Leisure Transformation Programme we invested a total of **£9.5 million** in pitches including:

- Lisnasharragh - two floodlit 3G five-a-side pitches.
- Brook - one floodlit 3G GAA pitch, one floodlit 3G soccer pitch, six five-a-side pitches and a hurling wall.
- Andersonstown - two 3G five-a-side pitches.
- Avoniel - seven 3G pitches; one full size and one seven-a-side and five five-a-side soccer pitches (3 indoor 2 outdoor).
- Olympia – one new full size floodlit 3G pitch.

2.4 Under the Local Investment Fund **£2.75 million** has been invested across soccer, athletics, lawn bowling, cricket and Gaelic sports including:

- Improvements to three bowling clubs.
- Improvements to seven Gaelic sports sites.
- Woodvale Cricket Club upgrade.
- Paisely Park Athletic Track improvements.
- Improvements at five soccer sites.
- Investment at two rugby sites.

2.5 Through collaboration with the Government Executive Office's Urban Villages programme £3 million investment has been made in Marrowbone Millenium Park including a full size floodlit 3G pitch and a community hub building.

2.6 Currently, working with the same funding partner, we are delivering a £7 million investment in Ballysillan playing fields including pitch improvements and the installation of a new full size floodlit 3G pitch.

2.7 Since 2024-2025 financial year an annual budget of £500,000 has been allocated for improving existing council outdoor sports facilities and this has already delivered:

GAA

- Installation of a dedicated GAA pitch and associated spectator fencing and ball stops at Henry Jones Playing Fields.
- Installation of additional full size grass GAA pitches and improvements to two existing grass GAA pitches, including installation of ball stops throughout City of Belfast (Mallusk) Playing Fields.
- Installation of ball stops for the GAA pitch at Falls Park.
- Reconfiguration of small, sided games pitches and pedestrian-vehicle separation measures at Woodlands Playing Fields.

Cricket

- Installation of a new synthetic cricket wicket at Victoria Park.
- Installation of a new cricket wicket and relocation and upgrade of a second at City of Belfast (Mallusk) Playing Fields.

Soccer

- Installation of spectator fencing and hard standing for the soccer pitch at Falls Park.
- Reinstatement of a disused soccer pitch and conversion of a full-sized soccer pitch to three small, sided games pitches at Strangford Playing Fields.
- Fence extensions and improvements at Marrowbone, Clarendon, Westlands and Napier Park pitches.

2.8 Financial support has also been provided to four partners to secure community access to pitches, these are:

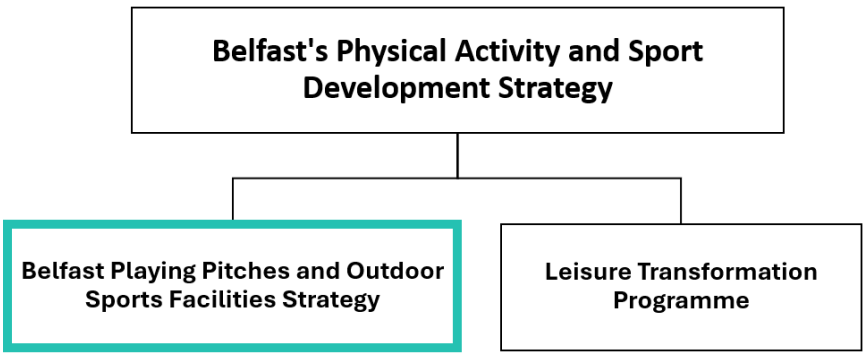
- Belfast Metropolitan College at Montgomery Road
- Ashfield Boys School
- Colaiste Feirste
- CI Hockey

3 Strategic Context

3.1 The improvement plan within this strategy is designed to maximise opportunities to realise the following Belfast Agenda outcomes so that by 2035:



3.2 This strategy is a sub-strategy from our overarching strategy, the **Belfast's Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy** and is also aligned with **Belfast's Leisure Transformation Programme**, as set out below.



3.3 The Belfast's Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy outlines our plan to increase participation in physical activity and sport, and strengthen the local sporting infrastructure, which in turn will improve health and wellbeing.

3.4 The Belfast Playing Pitches and Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy supports our overarching strategy by providing the outdoor sports facility, playing pitch infrastructure, and partnership connections for organised sport.

Strategic vision, aims and priorities

3.5 Our vision for playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities is:

"A city with sufficient, quality and accessible facilities, which are able to adapt to changing user needs over time and help inspire residents to participate in outdoor sports on a regular and sustained basis"

3.6 This strategy aims to improve the quality, accessibility and offering of outdoor playing facilities. It will minimise barriers where possible and maximise the number of Belfast residents playing organised, outdoor sports. It will contribute to our wider sports development and corporate goals, particularly in respect of improved health and wellbeing and vibrant and connected communities.

Scope

3.7 In 2023-2024, while establishing a baseline in advance of the development of this strategy, Council officers, supported by Otium Consulting, carried out an online survey of Belfast sports clubs. A total of 80 clubs returned surveys, representative of 11 sports. The 11 sports were:

- American Football
- Athletics
- Basketball
- Cricket
- Cycling
- Gaelic Games
- Hockey
- Lawn Bowls
- Rugby
- Soccer
- Softball

3.8 Apart from hockey all the sports surveyed currently utilise a council facility at least part of the time. All the sports listed are within the scope of this 10 year strategy. However, given the high volume of participants in soccer and Gaelic games and the significant gap between supply and demand as evidenced below, it has been agreed that these two sports will be the primary focus of the first phase of the strategy. Improvement plan actions identified under the facility priority, including capital investment, will be prioritised towards closing the supply gap for these two sports during years one to four.

Table 1. Participation levels

Sport	No of clubs	No of teams	Est. players
Soccer	92	1,072	14,522
GAA	23	529	8698

Table 2. Supply v Demand
(*includes private pitches and other pitches that are not available for club bookings)

Sport	Demand (Hours)	*Supply (Hours)	Supply (BCC Only)	*Surplus / Deficit	BCC Surplus / Defecit (compared to overall demand)
Soccer	92,083	140,672	68,384	48,589 surplus	23,699 deficit
GAA	55,910	39,280	11,712	16,630 deficit	44,198 deficit

Regional context

3.9 Preparation of the strategy has been undertaken within the context of, and informed by, a range of regional and local approaches to the provision of playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities. Five strategies are key to this work, they are:

- Programme for Government (draft), NI Executive.
- Active Living: Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for NI, Department for Communities.
- The Power of Sport: Corporate Plan 2021-2026, Sport NI.
- The Belfast Agenda 2035, Belfast City Council.
- Belfast's Physical Activity and Sport Development Strategy (draft 2026), Belfast City Council.

3.10 Encouragingly, the findings below highlight key themes within these strategies that align directly with our Playing Pitches and Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy, as well as the Belfast Agenda. These themes emphasise the importance and benefits of:

- Not only sport, but physical activity more generally, in improving the health and wellbeing and quality of life of citizens.
- Partnership working in achieving long term objectives and goals.
- Capital investment in high quality sport and physical activity infrastructure.
- Community involvement and the development of well connected communities through sport.
- Equality, and the need to encourage and support participation among underrepresented groups, who often have the lowest participation in sport and experience poor some of the worst health outcomes.

3.11 Sustained focus and commitment from all relevant stakeholders on these key cross-cutting themes offers a significant opportunity to improve the health, wellbeing and overall quality of life of citizens across Belfast and the wider Northern Ireland region. Given the significant budgetary pressures facing all sectors, maintaining focus, securing much needed investment, and working together to maximises resources and ensure timely delivery, will be essential if the aims and objectives of these strategies are to become a reality.

Strategic factors to consider

3.12 Several factors have influenced the development of this strategy:

- Belfast's population increased by nearly a third between 2011 and 2022. This growth was driven in part by local government reform in 2015, which increased Belfast's population by approximately 53,000 because of boundary changes alone.
- Changing demographics and the need to ensure equality of opportunity across all sections of the community.
- Growing interest in team sports, particularly post-COVID and amongst children and women. This is largely as a result of successful sports development initiatives delivered by local authorities, sports clubs, Sport NI and sport's governing bodies, together with the increased visibility of female sporting role models.
- The availability and popularity of 3G surfaces as an alternative to natural grass pitches. These pitches are typically floodlit, have a substantially higher playing capacity than natural grass surfaces and, subject to appropriate maintenance, have an average lifespan of 10 to12 years. For the purposes of the baseline for this strategy, a 3G pitch is deemed to have a weekly capacity for use (carrying capacity) of 32 hours (Monday to Friday 6pm-10pm, plus 12 hours at weekends) over 46

weeks per year, amounting to 1,472 hours annually. This is a recognised approach to assessing carrying capacity (for calculations of supply and demand) and reflects the fact that pitch usage outside these periods is generally very unpopular with clubs.

- It is critical to keep abreast of ongoing developments, risks and upgrades required, particularly iin light of concerns relating to rubber crumb infill and the planned EU restrictions on its use from 2032. This is essential to ensure that facilities remain safe, effective and represent value for money.
- The limited capacity of natural grass surfaces, typically estimated at 160 hours per season or4 hours per week. This capacity is often further reduced during winter season and generally accommodates no more than two or three matches per week, followed by a three to four month recovery period during the summer. The carrying capacity of a natural grass pitch is determined by a range of technical issues such as drainage and the maintenance regime.
- Very high demand for floodlit 3G pitches for winter training. We have several large multi-sport pitches, installed as part of the first pitches strategy, which can accommodate both Gaelic games and soccer. Existing usage agreements often result in these facilities being heavily booked by soccer clubs to the detriment of Gaelic clubs who struggle to find alternatives. Increasing GAA usage at these sites could, in some circumstances, displace soccer activity and would therefore require careful management.
- The spatial and financial constraints faced by sports clubs when seeking to develop facilities to respond to increasing demand.
- The need to maximise the use of land while maintaining adequate levels of open spaces in parks and other public areas. This helps ensure vital elements of urban life, health and wellbeing are protected for informal sport, play, recreation and relaxation. This is particularly significant given that statistics from Belfast's Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy indicate that walking is the most popular form of physical activity with 65% of residents using walking to stay active. Insufficient time was also cited as one of the top barriers to sports participation. Therefore, combining informal sport and recreation such as walking, running and cycling at sites for organised outdoor sport, presents an opportunity for spectators and care givers to maximise their time and exercise whilst others are participating in the team sporting activity.
- Land availability is a critical factor influencing the development of playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities. While Belfast's population continues to grow, the availability of council owned land suitable for sporting pitch development does not. We must therefore maximise the potential of its existing land resources and consider how partners in all sectors can collaborate to support pitch developments.
- The land requirement for a full size soccer pitch requires 5,856m sq, compared with 12,600m sq for a full size GAA pitch. This difference places additional pressure on the availability of suitable land within the council estate for future sports facility development.

4 Key Findings

Data, Research and Intelligence: Methodology

4.1 The approach to developing the Belfast Playing Pitches and Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy includes three key strands of work:

4.2 Strand 1: Consultation, engagement and site inspections

Work undertaken by the council in conjunction with consultants in 2023-2024, establish the base line information across all sports and council facilities. This work included:

- Four consultation events - delivered across Belfast. A total of 55 individuals attended, representing 27 clubs across seven sports.
- Quality inspections - of all council owned playing pitch and outdoor sports facilities sites. Thes visits were and inspections were undertaken during March and April 2024.
- Consultation interviews - with key organisations and stakeholders with an interest in the provision of playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities. These interviews informed the commentary and assessment of current provision and the strategic context for future provision.

4.3 Strand 2: Focused survey work undertaken by Belfast City Council in 2025

The baseline work completed in 2023-24 identified that four sports make up the majority use of council pitch facilities. To ensure that this strategy was informed on the most comprehensive and up to date information possible, a further, more targeted survey was undertaken in 2025, focusing on these four sports. Response rates were high across all sports surveyed:

- Soccer: 80%
- Gaelic games: 91%
- Rugby: 67%
- Cricket: 59%

As a result of the 2025 survey the significant volume of participants involved in soccer and Gaelic games has been clearly evidenced.

Table 3. Soccer and GAA club numbers in Belfast catchment area

Sport	No of clubs	No of teams	Est. players
Soccer	92	1,072	14,522
GAA	23	529	8698

Bridging the significant gap between supply and demand for soccer and GAA has been identified as a council priority. The facilities priority within this strategy will adopt a phased approach, with the first phase (Years 1 to 4) focusing on improvement plan actions aimed at reducing the supply gap for these two sports. The partnership and resource priorities will continue to have a broader focus, supporting all the sports within the scope of this strategy.

4.4 Strand 3: Further consultation and engagement

This strand of work will monitor and respond to the outcomes of the first phase of capital investment and build the business case for further investment, ensuring focus on where it can deliver most impact against strategic outcomes. Strand 3 will include the reassessment of supply and demand across all 11 sports covered by this strategy.

In addition to the overarching strategic factors outlined above, survey and consultation responses were instrumental in shaping the improvement plans. High level commentary on responses received from soccer and GAA clubs is summarised below to support development of facilities priority improvement plan. All soccer and GAA clubs within our catchment area were contacted as part of the 2025 survey. Whie response rates were high, they did not reach 100%. The relevant governing bodies were also contacted for comment by our consultant Otium and their feedback has been incorporated into the findings below.

4.5 Responses in relation to soccer:

The 2025 survey achieved an 80% response rate from the local soccer clubs contacted. Consultation responses identified the following key challenges facing Belfast clubs:

- **Mid-week training facilities:** preferably floodlit 3G. Most Belfast's clubs highlighted accessing training facilities as a significant challenge. Increasesed participation rates, especially among girls and women, has intensified demand for training facilities in recent years.
- **Supply and demand:** 60% of clubs reported difficulties securing pitch bookings for matches, while 55% reported the same issue obtaining training slots. Clubs expressed the need for additional pitches, improved changing facilities, and dedicated clubhouses to accommodate growing membership and enhance club activities.
- **Facility quality:** many clubs reported concerns regarding the consistency and quality of playing surface. The Irish Football Association (IFA), recommended that we ensure 3G pitches are certified to a recognised standard and maintained to that level. For grass pitches, the issue of insufficient supply has resulted in overuse in some locations, impacting pitch quality and leading to match cancellations. The IFA also recommended we have a buffer supply of pitches available for use, amounting to a small oversupply rather than merely meeting current demand. Concerns were also raised that some changing pavilions no longer meet modern expectations and quality standards particularly in relation to provision for women and girls.
- **Location/proximity:** many clubs reported difficulties with the distance and location of suitable facilities, affecting their ability to provide training opportunities, particularly for youth teams and to host matches.
- **Community and youth engagement:** clubs emphasised the importance of facilities that support youth and community programmes, foster local talent and encourage greater participation in sport.

These insights highlight the importance of addressing issues relating to pitch and pavilion maintenance, improving facility conditions including the pavilion, and quality of floodlighting and ensuring pitch supply is sufficient to meet the growing demands of soccer clubs in the council area.

4.6 Responses in relation to Gaelic games

The survey achieved a 91% response rate from Gaelic games clubs.

The Board of County Antrim GAA highlighted its aspiration to have a pitch available for each of its clubs across Belfast. However, given the limited availability of land within a heavily developed urban area such as Belfast, and the larger footprint for full-size GAA pitches (12,600m sq compared with 5,856 m sq for a full size soccer pitch), achieving this aspiration presents a significant challenge.

- **Sports Hubs** - 78% of clubs are in favour of using shared sports hub facilities for training or matches. Booking availability, floodlighting and rental fees were identified as the most important considerations.
- **Facility quality and location:**
    - **Condition and availability of venues:** most clubs reported difficulties accessing venues of a suitable standard especially suitable floodlit facilities for training.
    - **Accessibility:** clubs report that the distance to, and location of, suitable facilities can negatively impact their ability to train and play matches effectively, particularly youth games.
- **Expense of facilities:** 22% of clubs reported that facility hire charges were prohibitive and had a negative impact on club operational budgets and capacity for growth.
- **Development needs:** many clubs identified the need for additional pitches, improved changing facilities, and dedicated clubhouse facilities to accommodate growing membership and enhance club activities.
- **Community and youth engagement:** clubs emphasised the importance of facilities that can support youth and community programmes, foster local talent and encourage sports participation.
- **Specific club needs:** clubs including St. Agnes GAC, East Belfast GAC and Wolfe Tones GAC outlined development plans that include upgrading existing facilities, securing dedicated pitches, and improving overall infrastructure to support growing levels of activity. These aspirations will require significant financial support.
- **Synthetic pitches:** survey responses identified a strong preference for grass surfaces, with only 29% of clubs indicating a willingness to use 3G surfaces for match play. The County Antrim GAA Board commented that 3G floodlit facilities, where they are provided and available for booking, are an excellent option for winter pre-season training and fitness. However, grass remains the preferred surface for match play.

4.7 Responses in relation to Cricket

Four of the seven cricket clubs within the council area completed a club's survey, while representatives from two clubs attended the stakeholder consultation event.

The Northern Cricket Union (NCU) advises that 'cricket is going through a boom presently with participant numbers growing at the fastest rate ever experienced', driven by the increasing popularity of the women's game and a shift in the diverse make-up of Northern Ireland's society. We currently provide five cricket pitches, all of which the NCU believe could benefit from further improvement and investment.

- **High demand:** 100% of clubs surveyed reported encountering barriers to accessing outdoor match facilities. The primary issues identified were difficulties securing booking slots (50%) and finding venues in suitable condition (50%). All clubs indicated a willingness to use shared sports hub facilities, provided that booking availability and rental fees were appropriate crucial factors.
- **Facility quality and condition:** finding venues with suitable surfaces and in good condition is a major issue, affecting 50% of clubs.
- **Floodlit venues:** the availability of suitable floodlit training facilites was also highlighted as a significant issue.
- **Development needs:** clubs reported continued growth in participation and highlighted the need for additional pitches and training facilities to accommodate their growing membership. Particular concern was expressed regarding the limited number of cricket pitches and practice nets in Belfast, with respondents calling for urgent attention to support the sport's future growth and participation.

- **Community and youth engagement:** Clubs placed a significant emphasis on increasing participation levels, particularly among youth and minority communities. Respondents identified improved access to facilities and additional capacity as key factors.

These insights highlight the importance of improving facility quality and maintenance, increasing access and availability, ensuring suitable conditions, and providing financial support to meet the growing demands of cricket clubs within the council area.

5 Overview of current supply and demand

5.1 Belfast has 276 playing pitches across 97 sites. While the majority of these facilities are available for community use, ownership and management are split across a range of sectors including council, education and private providers.

5.2 We manage and operate 131 playing pitches across 28 sites across Belfast. In addition, we provide:

- 24 synthetic pitches, managed by our leisure provider GLL
- 13 pitches that are leased or managed under a facility agreement with local sports clubs; and
- 39 multi-use games areas (MUGAs), managed by us and used for a variety of sports including soccer, basketball, tennis, netball, and Gaelic football.

5.3 The findings of the demand and supply analysis for soccer and Gaelic games is illustrated in Table 4 below. These figures represent the best possible assessment, given the limited publicly available accessible data and the challenges in obtaining complete data from clubs, leagues and the wide range of public, private and community sector providers. Demand estimates are based primarily on club audit returns and have been supplemented, where necessary, using the knowledge of internal subject matter experts to address gaps in data submissions. Supply estimates are based on our facility data and an extensive city-wide mapping exercise undertaken to identify and assess the availability of facilities across Belfast.

Table 4. Supply v Demand

(* this includes private pitches and other pitches that are not available for club bookings)

Sport	Demand (Hours)	*Supply (Hours)	Supply (BCC Only)	*Surplus / Deficit	BCC Surplus / Defecit (compared to overall demand)
Soccer	92,083	140,672	68,384	48,589 surplus	23,699 deficit
GAA	55,910	39,280	11,712	16,630 deficit	44,198 deficit

5.4 Carrying capacity

For the purposes of establishing the baseline for this strategy, the following assumptions have been applied in relation to pitch carrying capacity:

- A **3G pitch** is deemed to have an annual carrying capacity of 1,472 hours, calculated as 32 hours weekly (Monday to Friday 6pm-10pm and 12 hours at weekends) over 46 weeks of the year. This is a recognised approach used in supply and demand assessments of carrying capacity, reflecting that while pitch usage outside these hours may be available, usage outside these peak periods is very unpopular with clubs.
- **Grass pitch** is deemed to have a carrying capacity of 160 hours per season, equivalent to four hours per week.

5.5 As the GAA clubs currently demonstrate a strong preference for grass surfaces for matches, it is much more difficult to meet service user demand. This challenge is compounded by Belfast's climate, which can result in grass pitches becoming unavailable during wet weather. However, greater use of artificial surfaces for both training and match play would significantly maximise the 'supply' benefits. If new and existing pitches were to be developed with artificial surfaces, this picture would be very different as each artificial pitch could carry 1,472 playing hours per year (based on peak demand hours) as opposed to 160 hours for grass. Given the limited availability of urban land, financial constraints for developing new

facilities. and the existing shortfall in pitch provision, it is recommended that use of artificial surfaces within Gaelic games be further explored with the GAA. Consideration should also be given to incorporating artificial surfaces into new and developed facilities where possible and practical.

6 Improvement Plan

6.1 Implementation plan

Our high-level improvement plan for achieving the long-term ambitions set out in this strategy is outlined below. A detailed implementation plan will be developed with a structured framework for delivery, outlining the key actions required, assigned responsibilities, and timelines for delivery to achieve our objectives and outcomes.

6.2 Monitoring, reporting and continuous improvement

A structured performance management framework will be developed, to measure progress against the strategic priorities and associated actions. Progress will be monitored and reported annually to ensure delivery remains on track and that we have impact towards achieving our long-term vision.

Strategic Priority: Collaborative Partnership		
Objective: To develop citywide strategic and collaborative partnerships to deliver our identified physical activity and sport development priorities.		
What do we plan to do	**Outcomes**	**Measure of Success**
1. Financially contribute capital support for floodlighting to the education sector in developing new pitches on the school estate.	School facilities become available for public use outside school core hours	• More school facilities are available for community use. • Community use of school facilities outside school hours is increased. • Monitoring of overall supply and demand will show increased supply for hockey, GAA and soccer pitches.
2. Administer a capital grant, for the Partner Facility Enhancement fund at a value of £1 million, providing capital grants to upgrade outdoor sports facilities (targeting 3G pitch replacements and floodlighting upgrades) which are not in council ownership, but which are available for use by the community.	Increase the supply of publicly available playing hours across pitch related sports	• More publicly available pitches. • Annual monitoring of overall supply and demand will show increased supply.
3. Work with sports governing bodies to identify opportunities for them to invest in the development of new and the enhancement of existing council facilities to increase participation in their sporting code.	Increased opportunities for sports to develop and membership to grow by utilising council assets.	• New opportunities and investment identified. • Increase in participation numbers in sport.

4. Work with sports governing bodies and subject matter experts to identify the best sustainable options for artificial playing surfaces in advance of the 2032 ban on the use of rubber crumb.	Pitches delivered under our facilities capital improvement plan will be built using a range of sustainable materials compliant with EU legislation. Quality checks on the surfaces will inform future investment decisions.	• Meet the 2032 deadline for discontinuing use of rubber crumb across our pitch estate.
5. Work with strategic partners across all sectors to review existing land assets for collaborative development of new pitches and outdoor sports facilities and/or for opportunities to gain community access to pitch facilities not in council ownership.	Increased numbers of outdoor sports facilities available for community use.	• Reduction in the gap between supply and demand evidenced by annual monitoring.

Strategic Priority: Facilities

Objective: To ensure suitable and sufficient facilities across the city, encouraging greater levels of participation in sport and physical activity.

What do we plan to do	Outcomes	Measure of Success
1. Prioritise 3G multisport pitches for GAA use in season.	School facilities become available for public use outside school core hours	• More school facilities are available for community use. • Community use of school facilities outside school hours is increased. • Monitoring of overall supply and demand will show increased supply for hockey, GAA and soccer pitches.
2. Audit our landbank to identify potential sites for development of new pitches prioritising sites which are large enough to accommodate GAA pitches.	Increase the supply of publicly available playing hours across pitch related sports	• More publicly available pitches. • Annual monitoring of overall supply and demand will show increased supply.
3. Identify sites with potential for development of new 3G soccer pitches	Increased opportunities for sports to develop and membership to grow by utilising council assets.	• New opportunities and investment identified. • Increase in participation numbers in sport.
4. Consider site optimisation plans for existing playing fields to support development of multi-sport hubs	Pitches delivered under our facilities capital improvement plan will be built using a range of sustainable materials compliant with EU legislation. Quality checks on the surfaces will inform future investment decisions.	• Meet the 2032 deadline for discontinuing use of rubber crumb across our pitch estate.

Strategic Priority: Resources		
Objective: To align resources with our Vision and strategic priorities for physical activity and sports development.		
What do we plan to do	**Outcomes**	**Measure of Success**
1. Procure and implement a new online booking system that is fully accessible and will improve access, customer experience and facility management.	A new online booking system increases customer access, streamlines administration, and provides reliable data to support better management and planning.	• Increase in online booking • Reduction in staff time on phone and email bookings • Improved customer satisfaction • Improved access to real time availability • Fairer access to customers.
2. Update our booking policy and processes in line with the new booking system.	A sign off booking policy and process that reflects that support the new online booking system.	• Approved booking policy and processes that is publicly available
3. Undertake regular performance monitoring of the booking system to consider trends and intelligence and identify any issues – to ensure they are addressed in a timely manner.	A reliable data driven monitoring process to support the operational use of the booking system and continuous improvement.	• Regular monitoring reports • Reduction in system errors and complaints
4. Conduct annual performance monitoring to analyse demand versus supply across all booking services, identifying gaps and area for improvement.	A clear understanding of demand via supply to support evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement for all service users.	• Annual demand via supply report • Identified improvement actions
5. Improve the planned and reactive pitch maintenance and inspection programme that supports all pitches, both grass and 3G	A fully operational pitch maintenance and inspection programme in place to ensure a consistent standard is achieved across all bookable pitches.	• Maintenance and inspection programme developed, costed and delivered • Improved pitch conditions • Improved customer satisfaction

Contact us:
Sports Development
Belfast City Council
9-21 Adelaide Street
Belfast
BT2 8DJ

leisure@belfastcity.gov.uk
www.belfastcity.gov.uk

Alternate formats:

We're committed to making sure that our publications are available to all sections of the community and
will consider providing this in other formats. If you need an alternative format, please call 9027 0234.