

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH

## Sports Facility Assessment and Strategy 2014 - 2031

FINAL REPORT DECEMBER 2014

PUBLIC SUMMARY



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## Introduction

1. Stevenage Borough Council's Sports Facility Assessment and Strategy will help the Council and its partners to plan for community sport and active recreation, both for the immediate future and in the long term. The Assessment and Strategy covers both built facilities, such as sports halls and swimming pools, and playing fields. It focusses on the needs of community sport rather than education facilities, although many of the facilities used by the community are on school sites.
2. The Strategy supports Stevenage's objective of creating healthier lifestyles by encouraging and enabling everyone to be more active through the provision of a quality and accessible network of community facilities. Its recommendations will be used to inform long term land use planning for the Borough and investment decisions about the Borough Council's own facility stock and those of partners, such as schools and clubs. The recommendations will ensure that the needs of the Stevenage community are met throughout the period up to 2031, both for the existing community and any new housing.
3. The recommendations take account of a number of factors such as: the condition and quality of the existing network of facilities; theoretical modelling including taking account of trends in participation in sport; the policy objectives of improving the equality of opportunity and improved health of Stevenage residents through higher levels of physical activity; and, potential new opportunities.
4. In developing the recommendations there has been extensive consultation with various parties, including sports clubs, the residents of Stevenage across different age groups, facility operators/managers, schools, Sport England, National Governing Bodies of Sport, and the adjoining local authorities.
5. The full report is available on <http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/>, as is a detailed technical summary. These reports consider each sports facility type in turn and bring the findings together on a site by site basis. The key proposals are summarised below.

## A replacement town centre leisure centre

6. The highest priority for Stevenage is to replace the separate but aging sports facilities in the Arts and Leisure Centre and Swimming Centre with a new modern design leisure centre in the town centre. The exact location of the new facility is yet to be agreed, but it is proposed to have:
  - Large sports hall with 8 badminton courts
  - 25m main swimming pool with 8 to 10 lanes with a separate large teaching pool
  - Large fitness gym, including equipment for people with disabilities, and possibly an under 16s gym

- 3 squash courts as flexible space with moveable walls
  - Studios/multi-purpose activity rooms
  - And possibly, a replacement indoor bowls hall if not provided for elsewhere
7. It is hoped to open this new leisure centre by 2020 and the cost is expected to be around £12-15m. This will be in part funded by the savings made from closing the existing Arts and Leisure Centre and Swimming Centre to sport. These aging buildings have high running costs and would require very significant remedial works to keep them open and good quality for the next 20+ years. A new town centre site would be easily accessible to people on foot and by public transport, and would have increased and improved car parking provision.

### **Ridlins Wood Athletics Track**

8. The track acts as a sub-regional facility drawing its users from both Stevenage and the surrounding areas. It is the home of the Stevenage and North Herts Athletics Club and also acts as a venue for schools athletics. The track is a particularly important facility for disability sport.
9. The recommendation is that the athletics stadium should be retained and maintained at a level which allows it to be used as a venue for athletics competitions. However, the stadium is an expensive facility to maintain, and ways need to be found to reduce the regular costs, whilst increasing the income levels through more usage. In common with most athletic track facilities, the reality is that it is highly unlikely that the facility could ever become fully self-sustaining.
10. To encourage more use the club would like to improve the ancillary facilities at the track, including improving the disability facilities. The costs/benefits of these proposals need to be confirmed through a feasibility study. In the longer term, the track will require resurfacing at a fairly high cost from around 2020, so its future will need to be kept under review.

### **Stevenage Golf and Conference Centre**

11. The golf course offers a unique opportunity for residents of Stevenage and would be an impossible facility to replace elsewhere within the Borough. The quality is generally good and the course is well liked by its users. Golf as a sport, however, needs to continually reinvent itself to attract new players, and it will be important to support new initiatives at the centre.
12. The recommendation is to keep the golf course but to encourage flexibility in its offer.

## **Fairlands Valley Park Water Sports Centre**

13. The Water Sports Centre is situated within the premier green space in Stevenage, and although the park itself is very well used by residents, the Water Sports Centre (including the ropes course and climbing facility) attracts only a small amount of community use each year. The Centre, however, does provide an important service for education, drawing users from across a wide area, including much of Hertfordshire.
14. Given this balance in use of the Water Sports Centre, the future of the funding arrangements of this facility need to be reviewed. The use and management of the park, including the cafe, would not be affected by this review.

## **Bowling greens at Shephalbury and King George V Playing Fields**

15. There are three bowling greens available to the community: one at Shephalbury Park and two at King George V (KGV) playing fields. These facilities are managed directly by Stevenage Borough Council, and due to the unique characteristics of the sites they vary in quality, with the KGV greens being better. The costs of maintaining the greens are not currently met by the income generated from their use.
16. The recommendation is to retain all three bowls greens. Additional demand is expected in the longer term, and if the sites were to be lost now, they would be difficult to replace. Retaining two different venues also allows two different clubs to operate in the Borough.
17. There is an immediate need to enable and encourage increased membership at the clubs, and to reduce the costs of maintenance as far as possible through more voluntary site management. Extra car parking and improved floodlights are also needed at KGV to support higher levels of use. At Shephalbury, there is a need to improve the green and the pavilion to encourage greater use.

## **An indoor bowls centre**

18. The indoor bowls hall at the Arts & Leisure Centre has a number of issues which means that it is not as available or attractive to indoor bowls as it could be. The issues mainly relate to the multi-use programming which means that a temporary surface is laid on top of the green. This causes problems with the green surface, as well as making the facility less available for bowls. However the need to make the Arts & Leisure Centre as financially viable as possible, means that there is limited scope to change the current arrangements.
19. The recommendation, therefore, is to explore the option of developing a new indoor bowls centre elsewhere in Stevenage, probably of six rink size. The preferred option

is at KGV close to the outdoor bowls greens. Such a location would help to strengthen both the indoor and outdoor bowls clubs, and provide a dedicated bowls site for the longer term. If this is not possible then either there would need to be new provision within the replacement leisure centre, or if this did not go ahead, then the current problems at the Arts & Leisure Centre would need to be addressed.

### **Lister Tennis Club, North Road**

20. Lister Tennis Club is the only tennis club in Stevenage. It is currently rebuilding its membership base, having re-established itself early in 2014. The club's site at North Road currently has three outdoor courts and two indoor courts of reasonable quality, with a clubhouse, and parking shared with the gym and rugby club.
21. The future of the tennis club is somewhat uncertain. It may stay on its existing site, in which case the future of the dome used to cover the indoor courts may need review, but any costs would be for the club to meet. The other option is for the club to relocate as part of a multisport facility, potentially at Chells Park. In this case there could be reasonable justification to replace both the two indoor and three outdoor courts on a like-for-like basis, or 5 floodlit courts. The costs of this re-provision would need to be met by the developer of the North Road site.

### **Shephalbury Park tennis and new MUGA**

22. There are currently 5 tennis courts adjacent to the bowling green which are open access but of moderate quality. The use for tennis is currently low and does not justify the retention of all of the courts. However there is a wish to retain some open access tennis opportunity in Stevenage, so 3 of the courts are proposed to be retained. The other 2 courts are proposed to be converted into an open access Multi Use Games Area.

### **School sites**

#### ***Marriotts School***

23. This is an important venue for a number of sports including gymnastics, football, netball and basketball. Most of the facilities were built as part of the recent school redevelopment and are of good quality. The top priority at Marriotts is to sign off of the Community Use Agreement (CUA) to ensure that long term community use of all of the facilities is secure.
24. In the short term, the demand for gymnastics is such that a satellite centre based elsewhere in Stevenage which can be provide both for pre-school gymnastics during the school day and club activities at other times should be considered. In the longer

term, the expansion of the existing dedicated gymnastics provision at Marriotts should be considered.

#### ***Nobel School***

25. This is also an important venue for sport, particularly for hockey and cricket training. There are some outstanding issues which need to be addressed arising from the construction of the new facilities, but otherwise they are good quality. Again, the top priority is to complete the sign off of the CUA, to ensure that long term community use of all of the facilities is secure.

#### ***Barnwell School***

26. This site contains the sports hall developed as Shephalbury Leisure Centre, but now transferred to the school. There is community access to the sports hall on a block booking basis, and some of the pitches. The CUA is, however, still to be signed off, which will ensure long term security of use.

#### ***The Barclay School***

27. The school does not currently have a sports hall and the assessment suggests that a larger size 4 court hall which is open to the community on a block booking basis would be a valuable addition to the community sports facility network. If a CUA can be assured then the development of a sports hall at the school can be a priority for future investment. Retention of community use of the other facilities and pitches on this site is important.

#### ***John Henry Newman***

28. John Henry Newman was previously used as a community sports facility on a formal joint use basis. When the school moved to academy status the facilities were closed to community use. Since September 2014 the school has reopened the artificial pitch for use by Stevenage Hockey Club, but this is on an informal hire basis, with no long term security of use

29. As hockey in Stevenage requires two pitches, to cater for the match demand at weekends, if the use of the artificial pitch at John Henry Newman can be made secure long term by a formal agreement, then ensuring that this pitch is maintained as a high quality facility is a priority. The pitch will require resurfacing within about 3-5 years, so this is a priority for shared investment between the partners. If the pitch at the school site cannot be secured for community use for hockey in the long term, then an alternative new artificial pitch elsewhere in Stevenage may need to be considered.

#### ***Thomas Alleyne School***

30. The community use of the sports facilities and pitches on this site is fairly limited and on an informal hire basis, with no security of use. The school would like to improve the quality of both its old school gym and its sports hall, and potentially develop an AGP, but given its location, adjacent to The Barclay School, these are unlikely to be priorities for community investment unless the school commits to a CUA and

provides a complementary offer to the facilities elsewhere. They do not therefore appear within the investment priority table within the Strategy.

#### ***A new secondary school for Stevenage***

31. The level of housing growth planned for the Borough means that a new secondary school is likely to be required. The location for this is yet to be confirmed. Should a new secondary school be built, then the site and sports facilities should be designed to cater for community use, and be secured long term for this use via a CUA.

#### ***Primary schools***

32. There are a number of primary schools which are used for mini or junior football which either allow community use on an informal basis or have a formally signed Community Use Agreements which were linked to planning permissions. Where the sites are used on an informal basis, then establishing this use on more formal grounds is a priority, ideally through a community use agreement.

#### ***Collenswood School site***

33. This school has now closed to pupils but it has a large, secure playing field which is still being used for football. The future of the site as a whole is uncertain, but the playing field area offers a real opportunity for good quality pitches to be made available for football, and potentially for cricket. However, long term sole community use of the playing fields cannot be guaranteed until a decision is made as to the future of the site as a whole.
34. There is a short-medium term priority to make the playing fields more suitable for community use, including wash facilities, car parking and access, if necessary.

### **Youth facilities – Skate Parks and Multi Use Games Areas (MUGAs)**

35. Access to youth facilities such as skate parks and open access MUGAs is limited, with several areas of the Borough being more than a 15 minute walk from any facility. A priority is to improve the network including a new challenging wheels park/skate park at Hampson Park, and a MUGA at Shephalbury Park. New facilities which might be either a skate park or MUGA are also proposed for St Nicholas Park, and one each within the proposed Stevenage West, Stevenage North and Bragbury End development. The existing skate park at Bowes Lyons should be retained and improved.

### **Football**

36. Football is an important sport in Stevenage and most of the pitches are in the parks. The recommendations refer only to the community game, as Stevenage FC has its own sites and development plans.

37. At the present time there is more than enough grass playing field space to provide for the sport, although there are currently too many pitches marked out at adult size and too few for the junior game. Most of the parks sites have some access to changing provision but not all of it is good quality, and informal use during the summer months has a serious impact on the pitch quality because the pitches are not able to recover from their winter use.
38. A number of schools across Stevenage are also used for football, particularly at the mini age groups. School sites can be a preferred option for clubs because they offer better child protection for the younger players, they do not suffer from dog fouling and they are often cheaper to hire, though only occasionally do they make changing facilities available.
39. Even with the potential new housing growth in Stevenage, there should be sufficient playing field space to provide for the sport. As the Football Association's recommended pitch sizes for each age group are coming into use, the opportunity should now be taken to look at how the various sites across Stevenage can be used most effectively and cost efficiently. To do this a Football Development Group will be established which will directly involve Stevenage Borough Council, Hertfordshire Football Association, the football leagues, and club representatives. This group will meet at least every 6 months and it will be this group's responsibility to agree which pitches and sites should be the priorities for improvement, and help to support the allocation of the parks pitches to the clubs and teams. There is also likely to be a need for more flexible kick off times across all of the age groups to enable each of the pitches to be used more than once at a weekend.
40. New housing will be expected to contribute towards funding the improvements of pitches and facilities, in line with the agreed priorities emerging from the Football Development Group's discussions.
41. In relation to specific sites, it is recognised that the site at Meadway may be required to create an access into proposed development at Stevenage West. As this would result in a complete loss of a sports facility, then the equivalent value of a replacement playing field area including the changing will be required to be invested elsewhere to enable the relocation of the clubs using the site to a facility(ies) of at least the same standard.
42. Chells Park is the Rugby Club's preferred site for its potential relocation. The Chells Park site has poor quality football pitches which were rested for the 2013/14 season. However, any football clubs using the site would need to be relocated to a facility(ies) of at least the equivalent alternative accessible pitch space with appropriate changing facilities and car parking.



## Cricket

43. There is one large cricket club in Stevenage which runs a number of teams, both adult and junior. Stevenage Cricket Club has a long term lease for its ground which is adjacent to the King George V playing fields. The success of the club means that it requires three good quality pitches for matches at peak times. The pitch at the Cricket Club itself is high quality but the two pitches marked out on the King George V playing fields are not high enough quality to meet the needs of all of the cricket club teams. The KGV site issues for cricket are directly linked to the fact that the park is a well-used public open space with lots of informal use, and the fact that the football pitches overlap the cricket pitches. As a consequence the cricket club has to use a site in Letchworth for some of its teams.
44. The priorities are, therefore, to retain the existing Cricket Club site and KGV use, but also to seek new alternative ground space for the short and longer terms. In the short term, the option of using Collenswood as a cricket venue as well as for football should be explored, possibly as a venue for junior cricket with the installation of an artificial strip. For the longer term, the potential for developing a double pitch site in Stevenage West (or other suitable site) as a specialist cricket facility should be investigated. Any new site should be fenced and not form part of general public open space provision, and should be provided with appropriate ancillary facilities.

## Rugby

45. Stevenage Town Rugby Football Club (RFC) currently has a poor quality two pitch site at North Road. The size of the club means that it is also using a pitch for its juniors at Chells Park. There are two future options for the club; to stay on the existing site and improve the quality of its pitches and facilities and also retain use of the Chells Park pitch; or potentially to move to a larger site which can provide a minimum of three pitches plus training area. The club's preferred relocation site is Chells Park, as part of a new multi-sport facility.
46. The club also has an aspiration to develop an artificial grass pitch to standard that can be used for rugby matches, and also potentially for football matches.
47. The options for the club need a detailed feasibility study, including long term viability. The cost of relocation of the club would need to be very largely met by the developer of the North Road site, although there may be some support from the national governing body for rugby, the RFU, if the club was to provide significantly upgraded facilities on the new site. If the club was to remain on the current site, then it would need to seek external grant aid towards the costs of the improvements.
48. The timing of any improvements or relocation would be dependent upon the outcome of the feasibility study.

## **Phasing and funding the proposals**

49. The recommendations in the Sports Facility Assessment and Strategy cover the period up to 2031, so it is not expected that all of the recommendations will be delivered as projects within the next few years, although there are some immediate priorities such as determining the way forwards for the proposed new leisure centre, agreeing the priorities for the parks pitches for football, and completing the community use agreements at the secondary school sites.
50. As projects come forward it will be important that all of the available resources are carefully targeted and tailored to meet the needs of the whole community, so any initial capital investment and long term revenue commitments can be fully justified. The facility recommendations are likely to be funded and supported by a range of partners and new facility provision might be via a mix of public and private sources. There are likely to be an increasing number of innovative partnership arrangements, and the Council will explore all of the available options to enable the delivery of the proposals.

## **Review and monitoring**

51. There will be an annual review of the recommendations which will help to maintain the momentum and commitment to their implementation. This will also help to ensure that any changes to the sports facility network can be taken into account. There should also be a full review of the Assessment and Strategy within 5 years to take account of such factors as the confirmed and proposed housing growth in and around the Borough, trends in sport, changes in the network of sports facilities, and the facility investment decisions by the Council and its partners.