

Agenda Item No:	5	
Committee:	Cabinet	
Date:	18 March 2024	
Report Title:	Updated Rugby Playing Pitch Strategy	

Cover sheet:

1 Purpose / Summary

- 1.1 For Cabinet to consider an updated playing pitch strategy (PPS) specifically for the sport of rugby in March. This strategy can be used as an evidence document for local community rugby clubs when applying for funding.

2 Key Issues

- 2.1 March Bears rugby club in March has seen incredible growth in the past 5 years, growing from a small club with an adult men's team into a community club that has several senior teams, women's rugby, youth rugby and walking rugby all taking place.
- 2.2 Unfortunately, this growth in the number of people playing the sport in the town has not been matched with a similar increase in the size or quality of facilities that the Club can access.
- 2.3 Fenland last had a PPS developed using Sport England grant funding in May 2016. This playing pitch strategy covers many sports, including rugby, and is some 222 pages long. Ideally the whole document would be revised, however third-party financial support is not available for a piece of work that would cost in the region of £30,000.
- 2.4 With significant change in the demand for rugby in March, it was considered reasonable to carry out a small piece of work to revise only the rugby section of the PPS. This will allow local community rugby clubs to use the revised Rugby PPS as an evidence document when applying for grant support from organisations such as Sport England or the Rugby Football League.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet adopts the recently developed Rugby Playing Pitch Strategy and that this is published alongside the Council's current 2016 Playing Pitch Strategy as a supplemental document.

Wards Affected	All
Forward Plan Reference	<u>KEY/16JAN24/01</u>
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Alex Miscandlon, Portfolio Holder for Leisure
Report Originator	Phil Hughes Head of Leisure Services
Contact Officer	Carol Pilson Corporate Director
Background Papers	Rugby Playing Pitch Strategy (attached in schedule 1)

1 BACKGROUND AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

1.1 See cover sheet.

2 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 See cover sheet.

3 CONSULTATION

3.1 Consultation has been undertaken as part of the Rugby PPS work with both March and Wisbech rugby clubs.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1 A whole PPS review was considered. However, this would not be funded by a third party – Sport England funded the 2016 report – leaving all costs with FDC. This was considered excessive so a review of only the rugby aspect of the PPS has been undertaken.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Legal Implications

5.2 N/A. The Rugby PPS supports local rugby clubs.

5.3 Financial Implications

5.4 N/A

5.5 Equality Implications

5.6 As detailed in the PPS document, the recent growth of the rugby club in March has allowed the addition of walking rugby for older people, youth rugby for boys and girls, as well as the addition of a women's side. The adoption of the PPS will allow the club to continue to seek improved facilities to continue to expand and broaden the appeal and offer of rugby in the town.

5.7 Any Other Relevant Implications

5.8 None

SCHEDULES

Schedule 1 - Draft Rugby Playing Pitch Strategy

Schedule 1

**Fenland District Council
Playing Pitch Strategy Review
Rugby Union
October 2023**

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Playing Pitch Strategy Review Regarding Rugby Union Pitch Provision

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1. Introduction and Context

- 1.1. In July 2023, Fenland District Council (FDC) appointed Strategic Leisure Limited (SLL) to undertake a review of the 2016 Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS), with a specific focus on rugby union in the March area. The rationale for the focus on rugby only is the significant growth of March Bears RFC, resulting in the unsuitability of their current site.

Background Context

- 1.2. The context for the review of the 2016 PPS, focussed on rugby union provision in March, is that due to large scale growth of the rugby union club, the data and findings are now out of date. March Bears RFC now require alternative, larger pitch provision and ancillary facilities, or increased access to additional provision.
- 1.3. The Elm Road site, where the rugby club is located, is shared with March Town Youth FC and March Athletic Club. The three organisations own a lease on the ground under the shared organisation of The March Sports Association.

Methodology

- 1.4. To undertake this review, the following methodology was used:
- Review of the 2016 PPS
 - Research, audits and site visits to determine the current pitch and ancillary facility supply and quality;
 - Meetings with all three sports club representatives;
 - Consultation with the RFU
 - Production of draft and final report.

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2. Review of existing Pitch Provision

Overview of existing Grass Pitch Provision at Elm Road

- 2.1. In order to understand changes to the capacity of rugby union pitch provision since 2016, a review of the existing PPS was undertaken. It should be noted that this review only considers the Elm Road site. The only other rugby union site that is available for community use is at Wisbech Rugby Club. A summary of the Elm Road pitch capacity as per the 2016 PPS is set out below.
- 2.2. The Sport England methodology for assessing grass rugby union pitch quality analyses two key elements; the maintenance programme and level of drainage. Each pitch is scored and classified in one of three categories. These represent actions required to improve site quality. A breakdown for each of the two scoring elements and three respective categories is provided in the following two tables.

Table 1: Rugby Pitch Maintenance Quality Assessment Specifications

Category	Overall Quality Rating
MO	Action requires significant improvements to the maintenance programme
M1	Action requires minor improvements to the maintenance programme
M2	Action requires no improvements to the maintenance programme

Table 2: Rugby Pitch Drainage Quality Assessment Specifications

Category	Overall Quality Rating
DO	Action on pipe draining system is needed on pitch
D1	Action on silt drainage system is needed on pitch
D2	No action is needed on pitch drainage
D3	No action is needed on pipe drainage or slit drainage.

- 2.3. These scores are then combined to provide a match equivalent capacity, as calculated in Table 3. Depending on the score of a site, a pitch is assigned a certain carrying capacity which can then be used to calculate the overall capacity of a site. This capacity is measured in Match Equivalent Sessions (MES) per week.

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Table 3: Match Equivalent Calculation for Rugby Union Pitches

Drainage	Maintenance		
	Poor (M0)	Standard (M1)	Good (M2)
Natural Inadequate (D0)	0.5	1.5	2
Natural Adequate (D1)	1.5	2	3
Pipe Drained (D2)	1.75	2.5	3.25
Pipe and Slit Drained (D3)	2	3	3.5

- 2.4. The 2016 PPS records Elm Road as having 1 senior grass pitch of M0/D2 quality, giving a capacity of 1.75 MES per week.
- 2.5. Although March Bears RFC did not engage in a consultation exercise at the time of the PPS, through independent research and information provided by the RFU, the club was recorded as operating 2 senior male teams. Both teams utilised the Elm Road site, creating a mid-week training demand of 1 MES and due to playing home and away fixtures a match play demand of 1 MES. The impact of this demand on the capacity of the site is demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Supply and Demand Balance – 2016 PPS

Site	Pitch Type	Quantity	Supply Capacity	Demand (Midweek)	Demand (Match Play)	Balance
Elm Road Sports Field	Senior	1	1.75	1	1	-0.25

- 2.6. Table 4 highlights that in 2016, Elm Road had a deficit of -0.25 MES.
- 2.7. The PPS recommended that the site was protected to minimise the risk of a large proportion of residents not having access to rugby club provision without significant travel. It was also recommended that enhancements to the drainage and maintenance of the pitch would increase the carrying capacity and therefore reduce the deficit. The club commissioned a Grounds Management Association (GMA) report and has made improvements based on the recommendations. The pitch is now scored as M1/D1, providing 2 MES of capacity per week.
- 2.8. Additionally, it was suggested that March Bears RFC could utilise Neale Wade Sports Centre for weekend matches as another method of reducing the 2016 deficit.

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- 2.9. Finally, the PPS recommended the installation of floodlighting which would create the opportunity for the club to hold mid-week training sessions throughout the winter months. This has since been completed.

Future Growth – 2016 PPS

- 2.10. The PPS suggested that based on team generation rates created (2016 ONS population data), and applying these to population predictions up to 2031, there would be no increase in senior, junior and mini/midi teams in March or the wider-Fenland area. March Bears RFC did not highlight any latent demand either, so it was not possible to analyse the impact of future growth on pitch capacity at Elm Road.

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3. Impact of the growth of March Bears RFC

Grass Pitch

- 3.1. Through consultation with March Bears RFC and the RFU, it is apparent that the club has grown substantially since the 2016 PPS. Official team numbers are highlighted in Table 5.

Table 5: Current Rugby Club Profile

Club	Adult teams (male)	Adult teams (women)	Junior Boys' teams	Junior Girls' teams	Mini / Midi teams	Total
March Bears RFC	2	1	3	1	5	12

- 3.2. Alongside the 13 teams highlighted through consultation, it is also noted that the club hosts 4 walking rugby teams, who utilise the grass pitch at Elm Road.
- 3.3. Table 6 shows the impact of this increased demand on the supply and demand balance at Elm Road. PPS guidance suggests that all senior and youth teams are assumed to play matches on senior pitches once a fortnight due to home and away fixtures. Match Equivalent Sessions have therefore been calculated as 0.5 per week for senior and youth teams. This is for match play only as training information has been provided by the club and is used to inform the mid-week training demand.
- 3.4. Regarding mini/midi rugby, in the case of Elm Road, all rugby takes place on the senior pitch due to lack of mini pitches. This level of rugby places less stress on the grass provision, therefore a lower demand of 0.25 is applied for mini/midi teams.

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Table 6: Current Supply and Demand Capacity (All Figures in MES)

Site	Number of Floodlit Pitches	Mid-Week Day/Training			Weekend Match Day Senior/ Junior			Weekend Match Day Mini			Total Senior/Junior Match Pitch Balance	Unmet Mini Demand Placed on Senior Match Pitches (50% of Senior ME)	Total Pitch Balance
		Supply (MES)	Demand	Balance	Supply	Demand	Balance	Supply	Demand	Balance			
Elm Road Sports Field	1	2	11.5	-9.5	0 ¹	3.5	-3.5	0	1.25	-1.25	-13	-1.25	-14.25

- 3.5. The figures in Table 6 show that the deficit has increased significantly since the 2016 PPS and is now -14.25 MES per week, comprising a training deficit of -9.5 MES and a match play deficit of -4.75 MES. This is a result of the large increase in team numbers and therefore demand, but also the availability of mid-week training capacity due to the installation of floodlighting.
- 3.6. The club's growth, from a small 2 team club to a large 12 team organisation with approximately 200 youth players, 71 senior males and 21 senior females, has placed a significant amount of additional pressure on the existing Elm Road pitch. Although there have been minor improvements to the playing surface, it is impossible for a single pitch to cater for these levels of demand.
- 3.7. As a result of the significant deficit of pitch provision, fixtures are regularly cancelled or rearranged due to the pitch being in a poor condition or because of scheduling issues.
- 3.8. Growth of the club has plateaued in recent seasons due to lack of additional capacity, but there is a large amount of latent demand for which the club cannot cater. This unmet demand is largely from women's, girls and junior teams which are key development areas for the RFU.
- 3.9. The RFU believe that the club's growth, although positive, has been unsustainable and if alternative arrangements for pitch provision are not found then the club will begin to lose members that cannot be catered for properly.

¹ 0 MES of supply has been assigned to 'Weekend Match Day' for senior/junior and mini columns as all capacity has already been used by 'Mid-Week Training'.

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Ancillary Facilities

- 3.10. Currently at Elm Road, there is a small ancillary facility which includes 2 very small, inadequate changing rooms with interconnecting toilets and showers. This does not meet RFU standards. There is also a ladies' changing room, which becomes the officials' room during male fixtures. However, this results in there being no female toilets or changing provision available on site on Saturday afternoons.
- 3.11. This lack of facilities also has the potential to cause safeguarding issues, with females and children often required to use unsuitable and unsecure changing and toilet provision.
- 3.12. As is further explored later in the report, the ancillary facility is a shared facility between the clubs that form the March Sports Association (MSA); March Bears RFC, March Town Youth FC and March Athletic Club. As there is also extensive use of the site from the football and athletics clubs, the demand for use of the ancillary facility is unmanageable and often causes friction between clubs.

Facility Requirements

- 3.13. It is apparent that the March Bears RFU Club requires access to additional floodlit, grass pitch provision. Based on the figures in Table 6, the club generates a demand of 14.25 MES per week. If this figure is used in conjunction with Table 3, it could be suggested that the club requires access to a minimum of 4 senior rugby pitches with the maximum quality score of M2/D3 to fully cater for their existing demand. However, this is challenging to achieve from a space and land basis, as well as a maintenance and quality basis.
- 3.14. March Bears has suggested that realistically they would require an additional 2 floodlit senior grass pitches to help reduce the deficit in pitch capacity. However, the RFU has referenced that the other club in Fenland, Wisbech RFC, have a similar number of teams and access to 3 senior pitches. Wisbech RFC still does not have enough capacity to meet all of their demand.
- 3.15. There have been preliminary discussions between the RFU and the Football Foundation about the potential for a rugby compliant (WR22) 3G pitch, which could cater for both March Bears RFC and Wisbech RFC. However, this would require both clubs to travel further for training and match play; it may still not be able to meet all the clubs' demands; and would pose an affordability issue, meaning it may be unsustainable for the clubs.
- 3.16. With regards to ancillary facilities, March Bears RFC has stated they now require a minimum of 4 changing rooms, an officials' room, medical facilities, as well as a bar and kitchen to generate the secondary spend which is vital to sustain the club.

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Other Sporting Use of Elm Road

- 3.17. Although the scope of work specifically requested for this report focusses on rugby union in March, it is worth noting the demand from other sports for pitch and ancillary facility provision at Elm Road. As previously mentioned, there was a partnership formed between football, rugby and athletic clubs under the name of the March Sports Association (MSA). The association manages the ground on a 70-year lease from a private land owner, of which there is 66 years remaining.
- 3.18. All three clubs highlighted the fact that even though facilities at Elm Road are inadequate, there is no other site in the area that provides access to ancillary facilities. However, sharing of the clubhouse between clubs does not currently work and a resolution needs to be found.

Football

- 3.19. March Town Youth FC is the main user of the football pitch also located at Elm Road. Although there are 32 youth teams in March, only 7 are based at Elm Road. The pitch is of standard quality, providing a capacity of 2 MES based on FA and Sport England guidance. The 7 teams create a match play demand of 3.5 MES per week, as well a training demand (highlighted by the club) of 6 MES per week. This places the pitch in a deficit of -7.5 MES, demonstrating that the football club is experiencing similar issues to the rugby club.
- 3.20. During consultation, the club also highlighted that they expect growth of another 8-10 teams in the next 2 years. This will further exacerbate the current deficit.
- 3.21. Other teams associated with the club utilise pitch provision at Estover Playing Fields. However, the pitches are not of suitable quality and therefore suffer from over-playing. The club also hires a number of other venues, but this is not financially sustainable.

Athletics

- 3.22. March Athletic Club is the other key user of Elm Road. The club has approximately 120 adult members and 70 junior members. However, there is significant latent demand, which is caused by limited access to appropriate facilities.
- 3.23. Although the club is mainly a road running club that uses Elm Road as a base, there is a small athletics sprint straight and throwing area located at the west edge of the site. The club has previously utilised the rugby and football pitches to cater for some of their training demand, however since the growth of both sports this is no longer possible.
- 3.24. The club is now also limited in the events offered to members, as throwing events have been limited since a spectator rail was installed adjacent to the rugby pitch. Shot Put training now takes place over the corner of the football pitch which is worsening the quality of football provision.

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- 3.25. There are a number of high-level athletes in the junior section of the club and the club requires space for meaningful training, especially for throwing events. However, there is no evening or weekend time where any club has sole use of the site. This creates issues between the clubs with regards to programming and space.

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4. Summary Conclusions and Recommendations

- 4.1. Based on the review of the 2016 PPS, growth of March Bears RFC and consultation with other clubs based at Elm Road, the following conclusions can be made:
- There is a significant deficit of -14.25 MES per week for grass rugby provision at Elm Road.
 - Although there is the potential for the rugby club to expand further, this growth has plateaued as a result of the lack of appropriate pitch provision.
 - Ancillary facilities at Elm Road are inadequate in catering for rugby union demand and have the potential to cause safeguarding issues. There are also issues arising between clubs about usage of the clubhouse.
 - March Town Youth FC is also suffering at the site due to a lack of provision and there is a current deficit of -7.5 MES.
 - March Athletics Club also suffers from a lack of facilities and has been negatively impacted by the growth of both football and rugby clubs.
- 4.2. It is clear that the existing clubs based at the Elm Road site have outgrown the available onsite capacity and available ancillary provision. As a consequence, all three clubs are in danger of losing members, reducing the scale of provision they can offer members, and potentially experiencing safeguarding issues. None of the clubs have sufficient space and facilities to either train and, in the case of rugby and football, play competitively.
- 4.3. The growth of the clubs is a fantastic achievement and demonstrates the local interest in being physically active. However, there now needs to be some changes to enable clubs to continue to grow and be able to offer safe, good quality facilities for training and competitive use.
- 4.4. The Elm Road site can accommodate some of either rugby or football plus the athletics club. However, there are significant MES deficits at the site for either club, so even if one sport was to re-locate from Elm Road, there would be a need to develop additional pitches on the site using the vacated area.
- 4.5. The current situation cannot continue as it is already having a negative impact on rugby, football and athletics.
- 4.6. Given the lack of capacity at Elm Road it is clear that at least one club needs to re-locate. The priority is the March Bears given their size and expected future growth.