

South Oxfordshire Playing Pitch Strategy Assessment Conclusions

Other (Lesser Played) Sports

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Other Pitch Sports

In addition to undertaking a fully compliant PPS guidance assessment for the main pitch sports, we were asked by the District Council to undertake an assessment of some other pitch sports, typically lesser played. These are: lacrosse, rounders, softball / baseball, rugby league and American Football.

An understanding of supply and demand was established using the same process as that used for the “main” pitch sports; liaison with sports governing bodies (NGBs), surveys or questions sent to clubs via NGBs where appropriate, and through identification of quality, supply and demand when gathering data for the main pitch sports (on the basis that most, if not all, lesser played pitch sports utilise the same pitches, either grass, artificial grass pitches (AGPs) or both.

Liaison with NGBs has suggested that there are no specific needs or demand issues for the lesser played sports in the District.

American Football

American Football is played football in two sub-types, Flag (non-contact) and Contact (the fully kitted pads and helmet). These are split into age groups and a playing stream just for the women’s game. All other types are mixed sex. The season typically runs from April until the end of summer.

British American Football (BAF) were contacted to identify clubs in the area and key issues that they were aware of. In South Oxfordshire, they identified no clubs. Any demand arising in South Oxfordshire is likely to be accommodated in clubs in neighbouring districts, for example, at the club which plays in Abingdon in Vale of the White Horse.

Lacrosse

Lacrosse is played over the winter months. England Lacrosse (EL) has stated that there are no clubs in the District. The nearest clubs are Oxford Brookes University (playing in Vale of the White Horse at the Oxford Brookes Botley campus at Harcourt Hill), Oxford University (playing within Oxford City) and Oxford City Lacrosse Club which plays at The Oxford Academy (within Oxford City), having formerly played at Horspath (moving to access sports-lit pitches for training during winter).

For any future facilities EL would look for access to floodlit pitches with the preferred surface being 3G. Where not available, lacrosse is normally played on grass, and hard hockey surfaces, although useable, are not ideal.

Rounders

We have had no response from Rounders England. However, in most cases rounders can usually be accommodated as a social game during summer months on school or local authority owned sites.

Softball and Baseball

Consultation, Supply and Demand

We contacted Baseball and Softball UK (BSUK), which responded to confirm that there is a league which hosts softball at Horspath Athletics Ground. The league (Oxford Softball League¹) responded to the survey sent. The website states that “Currently, the Oxford Softball League is for mixed (co-ed) slowpitch softball; however, there are opportunities for ‘single sex’ tournaments and many of our players play fastpitch softball. Slowpitch softball is a social team sport, played by teams made up of 5 men and 5 women.”

The league comprises 9 teams (adult teams, aged 14+) and has around 160 players in total. The pitches used for matches are marked over grass rugby pitches, with 3 softball pitches being used, predominantly in the summer months. Matches are played on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Training takes place on the 3G pitch at Horspath, with pre-season development taster sessions at Greyfriars Catholic School, Oxford.

The league has suggested that it could host a greater number of teams if it had access to more home pitches and to training time. There is a maximum of 10 teams which can play in the league from the home ground venue at Horspath without access to additional pitches. They would also like to add a youth section, but this is also subject to having additional pitch capacity.

The league has identified a need to improve the surfaces of the grass pitches, through rolling, given that they are used extensively by the rugby club in the winter months, although has said that they are in good condition considering this. They have also identified that developments at the rugby club have meant that it is harder to fit three full-size softball pitches in the space available. The league would also like some basic infrastructure such as back stop fences, permanent base fittings and batting cages.

The league has stated that it has a close partnership with Oxford Brookes University with league players offering coaching and one of the league teams being made up of students and graduates. While softball is a BUCS sport, Brookes does not have its own facilities to host any play. The league cannot host matches for the University at Horspath as University fixtures are between October and March when the rugby club uses the site.

Key issues

- There appears to be unmet demand in the northern part of the District, which serves the Oxford area as a whole. Potential growth of the league and sport seems to be prevented by a lack of supply, particularly grass pitches to play matches. There are good and close links with Oxford Brookes University, but the constraints also affect potential for growth from University players too. The University has no home ground to play from.

¹ See <https://www.oxfordsoftball.uk/>

- There are constraining factors in the league's use of the Horspath site (such as growth of the rugby club) and the league would like provision to better fit the sport's needs.
- Pitch quality on the current (Horspath) site is good but could be better (flatter).

Recommendations

Protect:

- Pitch capacity provided by the rugby club at Horspath for softball should be protected from other use. Ensure that play can be accommodated alongside use by gaelic football during the summer months.

Enhance:

- Pitch quality for use by softball should be improved at the end of the rugby season, for example, rolling the softball pitches (particularly the infield) to improve pitches and safety for players.

Provide:

- Support provision of infrastructure to support softball at Horspath, for example, back stop fences, permanent base fittings and batting cages, where provision of these do not impact negatively on use of the site for rugby.
- Explore, with the club and BSUK, and Oxford City Council and Oxford Brookes University if appropriate, the possible relocation of the softball league to a site which can be a more permanent ground for a growing sport, enabling the required fixed infrastructure to be put in place and at least one additional pitch to be marked out, providing at least a total of 4 full-size softball pitches. Such a site will need to be on the edge of Oxford in order to enable the league to continue to grow links with and accommodate players from Oxford Brookes University. If this recommendation can be taken forward, the recommendations for softball relating to Horspath will not need to be delivered.

Rugby League

We contacted the Rugby Football League, which confirmed that there are no clubs in the District, with the nearest three clubs being in Swindon, Wokingham and Reading. We contacted these clubs asking if there are any issues which might relate to the District but had no response.

Gaelic Football

Consultation, Supply and Demand

We contacted the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) of Britain which confirmed that there is one club (Eire Og Oxford) which plays in South Oxfordshire, at Horspath athletics ground on a grass rugby pitch. The club completed a survey. It has around 150 members across seven teams / age groups (Men's, Women, U15 boys, U13 boys, U11 mixed, U9 mixed, U7 mixed and U5 mixed). When available, the club books the 3G pitch to train, for all teams apart from the U5s which play indoors at a school in Cowley. Matches are usually played on a Saturday or Sunday. If the club is to field more teams, it would need more coaching staff and volunteers and improved access to a sports-lit training pitch. The club would like to build growth in underage and ladies sections. It is happy with the current home ground at Horspath but the cost of hire is a concern.

Key issues

- Additional demand for slots on a 3G to enable more certainty for winter training on weekday evenings. If additional volunteers and coaching time can be found, additional slots on a 3G would enable the club to cater for more players and grow the number of teams it has.
- While the club did not raise the quality of grass pitches as an issue, overplay on the site is a concern when considering rugby use on its own. Retaining quality of the grass pitches is a key issue on the site.

Recommendations

Protect:

- Protect the pitches from loss, as specified in the rugby assessment, in order to protect existing capacity used for gaelic football.
- Protect the capacity used by Eire Og Oxford for gaelic football, either on-site or finding an alternative solution to accommodate gaelic football play if rugby use continues to grow on the site. Ensure that play can be accommodated alongside use by softball during the summer months.

Enhance:

- Enhance the pitches on the Horspath site, as specified in the rugby assessment.

Provide:

- If additional 3G provision is made in the sub-area in alignment with the rugby and football recommendations, ensure that capacity is available for additional gaelic football use if there continue to be too few slots available at the Horspath 3G (and subject to a new 3G being in a location which suits Eire Og Oxford).