

Playing Fields Statistics

This publication sets out the key data relating to the development, change of use or disposal of playing fields in England. The bulk of the material is already published in one form or another but this drawing together of the data in a comprehensive account is intended to help inform the debate on playing fields policy.

2. This publication can be read in conjunction with the companion publication *Protecting Playing Fields* which sets out in more detail the current systems in place to insure that playing fields which are needed are not disposed of while enabling those that are genuinely surplus to requirements can be put to other uses. *Protecting Playing Fields* is available from DCMS's Public Enquiry Unit and at www.culture.gov.uk.

3. This publication represents the outcome of discussions between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, Sport England, The National Playing Fields Association and the Central Council of Physical Recreation in the Playing Fields Monitoring Group on the optimum format for publication of such data. A number of footnotes have been inserted to explain processes and provide definitions but further detailed information is available in *Protecting Playing Fields*.

The land use planning system

4. Sport England is a statutory consultee for all planning applications affecting playing fields. This means that local authorities are required to send copies of planning applications which affect playing fields to Sport England.

5. Government and Sport England are committed to the preservation of playing fields. However they accept that it is not possible in all instances to retain land in its existing use. Sport England, in considering the applications referred to them, have clear criteria on which to assess the merits of applications to change the use of playing fields. These can be summarised as ensuring proposals do not contain a net detriment to the stock or quality of playing pitches on playing fields, or to sport as a whole. For applications where Sport England's criteria are not met, Sport England will lodge an objection with the local planning authority. The local planning authority is then obliged to take Sport England's views into consideration when determining the planning application.

6. **Table A** sets out the number of planning applications affecting playing fields which were referred to Sport England as a statutory consultees in the past two years. It sets out the number to which they objected as containing proposals detrimental to sport and the outcome in the eventual planning system of those Sport England objections.

Table A: Applications by Sport England decision

	1999-2000		2000-2001	
<u>Objection by Sport England</u>	133	21%	132	15%
Planning permission refused	32	24%	38	29%

Planning Permission given ¹	47	35%	39	29%
Application withdrawn ²	38	29%	35	27%
Decision outstanding	16	12%	20	15%
<u>No objection by Sport England</u> as proposals not detrimental to sport	492	79%	743	85%
Total Applications	625	100%	875	100%

Table A shows that the majority of planning applications in both years did not contain proposals which Sport England believed to be detrimental to sport and that in only a minority of cases did an application proceed in the face of Sport England objection.

8. Table B sets out in more detail what happened in those instances where Sport England objected to the proposed change of use of a playing field.

Table B: Applications with Sport England objection - further breakdown

	1999-2000		2000-2001	
Planning permission refused by local planning authority	32	24%	38	29%
Planning permission given:				
Education or public owner	30	23%	25	18%
Private sports clubs or other	17	12%	14	11%
Application withdrawn	38	29%	35	27%
Decision outstanding	16	12%	20	15%
All with Sport England objection	133	100%	132	100%

During these two years the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (now the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) called in two of the above applications for his own determination.³

¹ The granting of planning permission by a local planning authority does not necessarily mean that the proposed development or change of use went ahead. Comprehensive data is not collected centrally on whether planning applications are actually implemented.

² Planning applications can be withdrawn for a wide range of reasons, which can include a decision not to proceed with the development, inability to fund proposals contained in the application or an agreement to withdraw and resubmit a different application - often so it overcomes objections.

³ A local planning authority is required to refer an application to the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) if it is minded to grant permission despite Sport England's objection. The Secretary of State for the DTLR will then decide if the application should be called in for his/her determination rather than being determined by the local authority. The statutory definition to which planning applications the requirement to refer to the Secretary of State applies is any application for the development of a playing field which is owned by a local authority, or which is currently used, or has in the previous five years been used, by an educational establishment.

The Secretary of State for the DTLR has powers to call in planning applications for his/her own determination under Section 77 of the Town and Country Planning Act. The policy is to be very selective about calling in planning applications. The number called in averages about 140 per year in England, about 0.03% of all planning applications received by local planning authorities. In general the Secretary of State for the DTLR will only intervene if planning issues of more than local importance are involved.

School playing fields

9. In addition to the protection of playing fields provided through the land use the planning system, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has introduced further measures to control the change of use of school playing fields. These measures require local authorities and schools to apply to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills for approval to dispose of or change the use of a playing field. The School Playing Field Advisory Panel advises the Secretary of State for Education and Skills on such applications. Once such approval has been obtained the change of use must still go through the planning system covered above.

10. All applications are assessed against published criteria assessing the schools' needs, existing community use of the playing field and that the proceeds of the proposed sale are reinvested to provide new or improved sports facilities at schools or are used to help to raise standards by providing better educational facilities. All approved applications meet these published criteria.

11. One of the aims behind publishing the criteria against which applications to the DfES Ministers will be assessed is to enable local education authorities and schools themselves to judge whether or not an application is likely to be approved. Authorities can see whether a particular disposal or change of use is likely to succeed. This makes them better able to decide whether it is worth making an application.

12. **Table C** covers schools' sports pitches that are equal to, or larger than, the Football Association's recommended area for games played by under-10s; that is 2,000m². These areas must also be able to be marked out as one or more sports pitches. **Table D** covers parts of sports pitches and areas that could be used as part of a sports pitch.

Table C: Applications for playing fields 2000 m² or larger

	1999-2000		2000-2001	
Application rejected	0	0%	0	0%
Application approved	29	76%	27	87%
Application withdrawn	8	21%	2	6.5%
Decision outstanding	1	3%	2	6.5%
All applications	38	100%	31	100%

Table D: Applications for playing fields smaller than 2000 m²

	1999-2000		2000-2001	
Application rejected	3	6%	0	0%
Application approved	43	86%	16	84%
Application withdrawn	3	6%	3	16%
Decision outstanding	1	2%	0	0%
All applications	50	100%	19	100%

13. The above tables show that fewer applications to dispose of playing fields or parts of

sports pitches are being made as local authorities and schools assess for themselves whether or not their proposals would meet the Government's published criteria.

14. The DfES publication "*The Protection of School Playing Fields and Land for City Academies*" sets out the full criteria against which applications are normally determined.

PROTECTING PLAYING FIELDS

In 1997 the Government inherited policies which encouraged the sale of playing fields owned by local authorities and local education authorities. It was a Manifesto Commitment to rectify this and swift action was taken to implement this commitment. In 1998 a Direction was introduced which gave the Secretary of State for Local Government, Transport and the Regions, now the Deputy Prime Minister, the power to call in planning applications where local authorities have not resolved objections to the change of use of playing fields to which Sport England has objected. Similar powers were also taken that year by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills which prevent Local Education Authorities from disposing of school playing fields without her consent.

2. This leaflet sets out how the current system – which is kept under continuous review – operates and will assist those seeking to interpret the playing field statistics published by DCMS's Playing Fields Monitoring Group – available at www.culture.gov.uk.

The land use planning system

3. Sport England is a statutory consultee for all planning applications affecting playing fields within their definition. This means that local authorities are required to send to Sport England copies of all planning applications which are likely to prejudice the use, or lead to the loss of use, of land being used as a playing field or land allocated for proposed use as playing fields in a development plan. This includes being consulted on planning applications affecting any land that has been used as playing fields in the last five years and any replacement of grass pitch with a synthetic surface.

4. The statutory definition of a playing field in this instance is "a delineated area, which together with any run off area, is of 0.4 hectares or more, and which is used for Association Football, American football, rugby, cricket, hockey, lacrosse, rounders, baseball, softball, Australian football, Gaelic football, shinty, hurling, polo or cycle polo."

5. Government and Sport England are committed to the preservation of playing fields. However they accept that it is not possible in all instances to retain land in its existing use. Sport England, in considering the applications referred to them, have clear criteria on which to assess the merits of applications to change the use of playing fields. These can be summarised as ensuring proposals do not contain a net detriment to the stock or quality of playing pitches on playing fields, or to sport as a whole. For applications where Sport England's criteria are not met, Sport England will lodge an objection with the local planning authority. The local planning authority is then obliged to take Sport England's views into consideration when determining the planning application.

6. A local planning authority is required to refer an application to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) if it is minded to grant permission despite Sport England's continued objection. The Deputy Prime Minister will then decide if the application should be called in for his/her own determination rather than being determined by the authority. The statutory definition to which planning applications this requirement to refer applies is any application for the development of a playing field which is owned by a local authority, or which is currently used, or has in the previous 5 years been used, by an educational institution.

7. The Government has recently published Planning Policy Guidance 17 for open space, sport and recreation (PPG 17) which provides a clear and robust message to local planning authorities about the need to protect playing fields, and provides much tougher policy tests which will need to be met before such facilities can be developed. The guidance also strongly

emphasises the need for local authorities to undertake rigorous needs assessments of local playing fields and sports facilities.

Sport England policy

8. Sport England's playing field policy – which informs its actions as a statutory consultee - is founded on presumption against loss except in exceptional circumstances, opposing the development of any playing field, except when the application meets one of the following criteria:

- E1 A carefully quantified and documented assessment of current and future needs has demonstrated to the satisfaction of Sport England that there is an excess of playing field provision in the catchment area, and the site has no special significance to the interests of sport. *Examples of this would be where a local playing pitch strategy has been carried out which showed there was not enough local demand to justify the continued provision of the pitches.*
- E2 The proposed development is ancillary to the principal use of the site as a playing field or playing fields, and does not effect the quantity and quality of pitches or adversely affect their use. *Examples of this include adding new changing rooms an extensions to clubhouses, the addition of floodlights and car parks to allow increased access and playing time.*
- E3 The proposed development affects only land incapable of forming, or forming part of, a playing pitch and does not result in the loss of or inability to make use of any playing pitch (including the maintenance of adequate safety margins), a reduction in the size of the playing area of any playing pitch or the loss of any other sporting/ancillary facilities on the site. *Examples of this typically include areas of a playing field which are of an odd shape, or of too steep a slope to support a pitch.*
- E4 The playing field or playing fields that would be lost as a result of the proposed development would be replaced by a playing field or playing fields of an equivalent or better quality and of equivalent or greater quantity, in a suitable location and subject to equivalent or better management arrangements prior to the commencement of development. *Examples of this would be the provision of new pitches on or off a site typically within a mile of the existing site, with the new pitches being better drained and therefore capable of greater use by the community.*
- E5 The proposed development is for an indoor or outdoor sports facility, the provision of which would be of sufficient benefit to the development of sport as to outweigh the detriment caused by the loss of the playing field or playing fields. *Examples of this include the provision of an all weather surface onto a pitch that was of poor quality, to allow increasing usage.*

School playing fields

9. In addition to the protection of playing fields provided through the land use the planning system, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has introduced further measures to control the change of use of school playing fields. These measures require schools to apply to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills for approval to dispose of or change the use of a playing field. As part of the assessment process, an independent School Playing Field Advisory

Panel has been set up to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills on such applications. The Panel, which is Chaired by the Headteacher of a large secondary school, comprises representatives from The National Playing Fields Association, the Central Council for Physical Recreation, the educational organisation Learning through Landscapes, the Local Government Association and the National Association of Head teachers. The Panel started work in August 2001 looking at all applications made since 16 July 2001. Once such approval has been obtained the change of use must still go through the planning system covered in Part 1. School 'playing fields' in this context mean any open green land large enough to be set out as a small sports pitch suitable for under 10s as well as whole sports fields.

10. All applications are assessed against published criteria. These criteria fall broadly under three headings:

(a) **schools' needs:** the playing field provision and curriculum needs at the school making the disposal, and at other local schools, will be met;

(b) **community needs:** community use of school playing fields is taken into account, with alternative facilities made available if necessary, and

(c) **finance:** any sale proceeds are re-invested to provide new or improved sports facilities at schools, or are used to help to raise standards by providing better educational facilities.

11. Criteria at (a) and (b) also mean that adequate levels of consultation must take place with schools, community users and the local community in general. All approved applications meet these published criteria.

12. One of the aims behind publishing the criteria against which applications to the DfES Ministers will be assessed is to enable local education authorities and schools themselves to judge whether or not an application is likely to be approved. Authorities can see whether a particular disposal or change of use is likely to succeed. This makes them better able to decide whether it is worth making an application.

13. The sale of whole school sports fields will only occur at closed schools or those that are moving to a new site which has replacement playing fields. The DfES publication '*The Protection of School Playing Fields and Land for City Academies*'¹ sets out the full criteria against which applications are normally determined.

¹ Copies of DfES Guidance on the protection of school playing fields can be obtained from www.teachernet.gsi.gov.schoolslandandproperty