

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: 3G Synthetic Sports Pitch

Meeting: Executive

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report gives Members an update on the recent publication of the Scottish Football Association (SFA) Facilities Strategy, considers the implications for the area in the provision of 3G pitches and recommends that Members revisit the earlier decision to install two 3G surfaces in the area.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Council in 2009 approved a plan to develop a network of 3G pitches across the area. It was intended that 6 pitches would be provided to support the development of football across the area to build upon the excellent work carried out by the many children's and youth football clubs in the area. It was envisaged that the pitches would be located adjacent to existing sports facilities that offered access to on site management, changing accommodation, car parking and social space. The pitches would then be run at minimal additional operational costs whilst providing an invaluable resource especially in the winter months.
- 2.2 Two locations were initially identified at Grangemouth Stadium (Inchyra Park) and Denny Football Centre. The rationale being that a new 3G synthetic pitch would complement the grass pitch provision already available at these sites. Similarly a strong football need had been identified through an excellent mix of clubs catering for children and adults including women and girls.
- 2.3 Separate business plans were completed for each site and planning applications submitted for both sites along with external funding applications for £225k for each facility, to **sportscotland**. They also asked for a Pitch Strategy to be prepared to enable them to consider the 2 requests in the light of potential developments available at that time. The draft Strategy, prepared in 2012, reaffirmed that a network of 3G pitches could be sustained in the area and identified 11 possible locations including some that did not meet the original criteria set out in 2.1 above.
- 2.4 The Grangemouth planning application was not supported by the local community in its early stages, when appropriate drawings and plans became available. The commercial operator of the nearby Little Kerse facility also expressed disquiet at the proposal. No further progress on this potential new facility was pursued as a consequence.
- 2.5 As design work continued on the proposed Denny facility, the SFA and **sportscotland** expressed concern at the proposed dimensions of the original Denny Football Centre pitch given its location on the existing blaes pitch as they sought a larger pitch and indicated that their maximum grant of £225k would not be awarded should a larger pitch not be installed. This led to an alternative site within the footprint of the Denny Football Centre being found and design work was undertaken for an adjacent location.

3. Developments in the last 4 years

- 3.1 Since 2009 there has been additional investment in provision across the area including:
- Commercial development at Little Kerse (full size 3G pitch and 4 five-a-side pitches, range of grass pitches) available for use by a number of clubs and leagues as well as general booking. A recent planning application indicates that a further full size 3G or 4G synthetic pitch is planned for this site.
 - Development at Falkirk Stadium by Falkirk Football Club (full size 3G pitch) available for the Club, the Falkirk Football Community Foundation, local clubs and general booking.
 - Commercial Indoor football provision at Coasters
- 3.2 In addition many of the local clubs have been awarded the SFA's quality mark for their approach to planning and developing the game at a local level. A number of clubs have also sought to create facility development plans either directly or in partnership with others. The most advanced of these are in Bo'ness at Newtown Park and in Denny at Dunipace Juniors Ground. An expression of interest from Camelon Juniors has also been received.
- 3.3 The football clubs in Denny, concerned by the delays and complexities of the Denny Football Centre options have shared plans for a partnership development at Dunipace Juniors. However they have no funding for the proposals and remain interested in a potential partnership with the Council.
- 3.4 More recently Falkirk Rugby Club and Grangemouth Rugby Club have expressed interest in installing a 3G surface that would have a different specification (longer pile) to allow use by Rugby and Football.
- 3.5 Stenhousemuir FC, the first club in the area to install a 3G surface with Council support in 2005, also now seek to replace their current surface and to consider expansion to other sites.
- 3.6 The Pitch Strategy also noted that the current 2G pitch surfaces at the secondary schools could be replaced at relatively low cost to provide the network desired. There are however issues with access and contractual liabilities which would concern **sportscotland** if financial support was requested for those specific sites as without full access, their long term sustainability would be difficult to demonstrate in the accompanying business plans.

4. **sportscotland** / SFA Position

- 4.1 **sportscotland** have been encouraging clubs, Trusts and Local Authorities to work more collaboratively to plan for their future development needs taking account of all of the resources available locally. They have some excellent examples of projects led by the relevant local football community to provide a facility that requires a minimal level of public subsidy and meets the longer term development needs of each of the clubs involved.

- 4.2 The SFA has recently launched its first Facilities Strategy, “The Big Pitch..... where the game is played”. This sets out their approach to supporting the delivery of quality grassroots football facilities across the Country. The Strategy proposes a mix of natural grass and 3G synthetic turf pitches. Higher priority is placed on the creation of 3G pitches because of the significant increase in capacity that can be achieved regardless of the weather. 3G pitches can be used 12 hours a day 7 days a week while a good grass pitch can be used for a maximum of 8 hours per week and is subject to weather and drainage conditions. The 3G pitch also provides consistency of the playing surface to improve playing skills and provide a quality experience.
- 4.3 The publication of the Strategy endorses the approach that has been built up by FCT in its approach to the proposed pitch at Denny Football Centre.
- 4.4 There has been a significant level of dialogue with the SFA and **sportscotland** to try to fully understand their requirements to support a successful funding bid. In essence they are looking for a pitch that is of a scale to meet the needs of junior, youth and adult groups and that has adequate supporting infrastructure. They are also looking for the pitch to be the underpinning resource that supports football development at all levels in the local community. This means that a number of key football clubs would represent the core user group and that this would be augmented by pay and play opportunities for people of all ages and abilities. The pitch could be developed by the Local Authority or by the clubs at a ground not in Council ownership.
- 4.5 There have been a number of excellent examples of community led football development projects across Scotland. Each has taken a phased approach to development and has been able to draw on external resources to augment those available locally. Placing clubs at the centre of the development and in control of the pace and direction of the projects may increase overall understanding and awareness of the challenges of facility development and operation.

5. Funding

- 5.1 Since the original 3G pitch proposals the landscape has changed with the arrival of the Trust, the development of additional facilities in the area and the recognition that the Council is unlikely to be able to fund a network of pitches and that it is more likely that the current fund of £740k is the only resource the Council has to offer the football community for the foreseeable future.
- 5.2 **sportscotland** remain enthusiastic about providing funding for projects fully supported by the local community clubs that have a robust business case to ensure its long term sustainability, is accessible to all and fits within a strategic plan for the provision of football pitches within the Falkirk area.
- 5.3 The local clubs have not been asked to identify funds to contribute to the development. However if a club led approach were to be adopted by the Council this might become one of the assessment criteria.

6. Options

6.1 Across the Falkirk area, the Sports Pitch Strategy identified a total of 11 possible sites for the provision of additional 3G synthetic pitches. They were:

- **Bo'ness Area**
Bo'ness Recreation Centre Newtown Park
- **Denny & Dunipace Area**
Denny High School Denny Football Centre
- **Falkirk Area**
Falkirk Stadium
Graeme High School
Stirling Road
Sunnyside
- **Grangemouth Area**
Inchyra Park
- **Larbert & Stenhousemuir Area**
Larbert High School
- **Polmont and Maddiston Area**
Braes High School

6.2 As some of the sites identified within the Sports Pitch Strategy fell out with the Council's ownership it is suggested that the Junior Football Club grounds such as Camelon Juniors, Dunipace Juniors, Falkirk Rugby Club, Grangemouth Rugby Club and a number of other grounds may also be potential sites for a multi club led development. This is a format that is being supported by **sportscotland** and the SFA with the attraction of external resources to the Clubs with the local authorities having a lesser role than a Council led development. It would also mean that the ongoing operational costs would rest with the clubs involved.

6.3 Denny Option

For clarity the current Denny option represents a shift from the original proposals to install the 3G pitch on the current blaes surface. It is now proposed to install a larger pitch on one of the current grass pitches at an indicative cost of £625k. This meets **sportscotland** and the SFA's requirement for a pitch size which allows greater flexibility in its programming and use. The larger pitch is likely to secure their funding of £225k. It is believed that this option could be funded from a combination of the current capital of £740k plus a potential grant award of £225k from **sportscotland**. Tenders have not yet been issued therefore the actual costs are as yet unknown.

6.4 Club Led Option

A number of clubs as outlined before are actively looking at how they can convert existing grass surfaces to 3G. It may be that the most appropriate option for the Council, to fulfill its objective of having a network of 3G pitches, is to encourage the clubs to submit development plans and business cases for their proposals. To benefit from Council support these would need to demonstrate clearly how they will be able to extend access to a number of clubs particularly those working with children and young people. To achieve a network of pitches the investment in any one location would need to be capped on the basis that the whole amount available would not be allocated to one club. This would require the clubs to identify additional funds beyond that potentially available from the Council and **sportscotland**. This option would mean that the clubs would be liable for the ongoing operational costs and risks. There would need to be strong and robust business planning to underpin each proposal. Given the early stage of development and thinking for most clubs this would likely mean that the pitches would not be provided for some time.

- 6.5 In respect of the mechanism for the Council to direct capital resources to club projects it should be noted that it is not possible to borrow to finance a non-Council asset, but it is available to harness Capital Grant for this purpose provided the expenditure would be treated as capital expenditure had it been incurred by the Council. The proposed expenditure would meet this test. There is a further test which requires the expenditure to be consistent with specific legislation in which case we do not need to seek specific Scottish Government consent. It is believed that the Housing Grants, Construction & Regeneration Act 1996 would be compliant legislation as it provides for recreational facilities.

- 6.6 This approach has the added advantage of creating opportunities to increase community ownership and capacity building. It gives the clubs a greater sense of involvement in the development of facilities and has the potential to reduce the ongoing financial impact of facility development for the Council. Practical support for clubs is available from social enterprise organisations such as Senscot and Firstport. A key feature of each of the projects has been local investment usually from the Council that has then been used for match funding with external funding partners. Stenhousemuir FC led the way in setting up a community interest company to meet their longer term ambitions. It would perhaps be helpful to share that experience with more clubs and encourage them with support from Senscot and Firstport as well as **sportscotland** to develop local business plans that could in the longer term bring greater external resources to the area and provide more pitches as originally envisaged when the decision to explore 3G pitches was made in 2009.

7. **Key considerations**

- 7.1 A network of 3G pitches has been delivered in the area by others at Stenhousemuir, Grangemouth and Falkirk. Each site offers a level of club, community and public access.
- 7.2 A network of 2G pitches is available for football training within the secondary school estate. It has access challenges in relation to times and charges.
- 7.3 There remains unmet demand for access to 3G provision.

- 7.4 There is approximately £740k in the capital programme for the installation of a 3G synthetic pitch.
- 7.5 In respect of Denny Football Centre it is likely that this option may be able to be funded as **sportscotland** had previously indicated likely support for the funding application for £225k.
- 7.6 **sportscotland** have been encouraging clubs, Trusts and Local Authorities to work more collaboratively to plan for their future development needs taking account of all of the resources available locally.
- 7.7 A number of clubs in both football and rugby are already considering how they might lead a pitch development in their own locality or facility in partnership with relevant local teams.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 The football and rugby community locally and nationally are keen to see growth and expansion in the number of 3G surfaces available in the Falkirk area. The original plan for the Council to lead on the development of a network of pitches looks less likely due to ongoing funding constraints. A number of pitches have been provided by others reducing the overall gap in provision. However there is still capacity for new pitches to be provided. The possibility of replacing existing poor quality grass pitches with new 3G ones offers a significant development opportunity for clubs.
- 8.2 The decision for the Council is to consider whether the resources in the capital programme can be offered as a partnership fund to local clubs to use as leverage for a funding bid to **sportscotland** subject to the appropriate financial approvals or if it should be invested in a Council owned site.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 **That Members decide whether to pursue the original site specific option or the Club led option. If the Club led option is preferred, to seek a further report outlining a mechanism and criteria for clubs to access the Council's funding.**

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