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Out to grass: a new approach to pitches

Kit Campbell takes issue with the Fields in Trust approach to playing field protection and offers an alternative approach to sports pitch management that could be financially and socially sustainable for local authorities and sports clubs.

What a load of utter garbage in the last issue from Alison Moore-Gwyn of Fields in Trust [TLR September, Fields in Trust: Protecting the 'Where']; I hope no-one takes any notice of it.

FIT claims that 6,000 playing fields have been lost to development between 1992 and 2009. So what? It isn't the number of playing fields that matters but whether those that exist are accessible, of such good quality and have such good changing accommodation that people want to use them, affordable and have the capacity to accommodate whatever demand exists, plus a margin for growth – if it ever happens. From 1992 to 2009 the total capacity of sports pitches across the country to accommodate demand has gone up, although the number of grass pitches has gone down.

How many hockey players want to abandon artificial surfaces and go back to bumpy, low-capacity grass pitches? And although many secondary schools – especially those that have been rebuilt – now have fewer winter grass pitches than before, an increasing proportion have at least one floodlit artificial-turf pitch (ATP) and community use is the norm. That wasn't the case with most of their former grass pitches. Each ATP can be used for at least four matches on a Saturday and a Sunday, plus other matches and/or training during the week. The football and rugby governing bodies are both calling for more floodlit third-generation ATPs across the country and sensible local authorities will both provide more of them and tell local football leagues to play on them – or provide their own pitches. Result: more participation; consistent ball roll and bounce from pitch to pitch and day to day and therefore better skills development; an end to “boot the ball up the park and hope for a lucky bounce”; fewer waterlogged pitches and cancelled matches; fewer pitches on which it would be sensible for goalies to wear wellies; fewer isolated, vandalised pavilions offering cold, dark, dank changing with showers – if they exist – that run cold all too quickly; an end to players coming face to faeces from dog fouling; and no more backlogs of cancelled fixtures at the start of the cricket season.

Most grass winter pitches in the UK are very poor quality. I am currently working on a pitches strategy for a local authority in the London area and quite a number of goalmouths on council pitches are bare earth – and it's only September. They haven't recovered from the end of the last season. Goodness knows what they'll be like by the end of this season. The FA estimated a few years ago that it will cost £2 billion to bring England's football pitches up to a decent standard. Fat chance. Research for SportScotland found that 80% of grass pitches are not fit for purpose. So why campaign to protect them? We ought to be inventing a better future, not clinging to the past when there were no alternatives to grass. Over half of all football in the UK is now five-a-side, with almost all of the outdoor version played on artificial surfaces. Doesn't that give a bit of a clue to what players want?

Then there's the cost. Not many councils know the extent to which they subsidise their grass pitches, which is probably just as well. If they did know they'd be horrified, although footballers would have to stop complaining about high pitch charges and council “profiteering”. Grass pitches are the most highly subsidised of all council-run sports facilities in terms of subsidy per user. The University of Birmingham manages three and a half ATPs at its playing fields. In 2010-11 these pitches generated an income of £271,000 against operating costs of £71,000, a surplus of £200,000. And income would have been higher but for the bad winter. Its 13 grass pitches, however, generated an income of just £34,000 against operating costs of £236,000, a loss of £202,000 or nearly £16,000 per pitch. In other words, income was about 14% of operating costs. In

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2009-10 Edinburgh Leisure generated an income of £116,000 from seven ATPs – and an income of £114,000 from 160 cricket, football and rugby grass pitches. Guess which cost significantly more to maintain (hint: it wasn't the ATPs). In research I did for SportScotland a number of years ago I concluded that, taking all capital and revenue costs into account, it would be cheaper for local authorities to provide and make artificial pitches available free to local clubs than continue to provide grass pitches and charge for them.

FIT claims to be the “thinking person’s charity”. There was obviously a typo in the article: surely it should have read ‘unthinking’? The Six Acre Standard is and always has been simply a comfort blanket for those unwilling or unable to think for themselves. Categorically, it isn’t “the benchmark for quantity, quality and accessibility for the provision of open space”.

So, dear readers, have nothing to do with FIT and its stupid head-in-the-sand/mud Q&EII Challenge. Protecting and preserving most poor-quality playing fields will achieve little or nothing for sport or local communities. Think instead how we can best stop forcing most winter pitch sport players to use sub-standard pitches and changing facilities; no wonder the pitch sports are in decline. How we can we best maximise participation at minimum cost, so councils have more to spend on enhancing and maintaining parks and other greenspaces that appeal to everyone – and possibly promoting participation. How we can best harness development for the public good instead of opposing it more or less on principle.

Here’s how. Forget the unplanned, opportunistic flogging of playing fields to enhance council coffers. Instead, let’s start the planned flogging of playing fields. But don’t sell them to whichever developer offers the most cash: instead, sell them to the one who will create the best and most innovative housing (has anyone noticed that we have a growing housing crisis in this country?) while using part of the former playing fields to create new local parks. The planning system is weak – developers can appeal against a refusal of permission – but there’s no appeal against “Sorry, your proposals are rubbish so we won’t sell to you”. Then comes the good bit. Use the capital receipts to construct new ATPs at suitable locations, particularly secondary schools. Ideally every secondary school should have both a sand-dressed and a 3G ATP. Invest in new community clubhouses next to the new ATPs. Many small local clubs are struggling financially and increasingly likely to fold; so knock a few heads together to create new community sports clubs – multi-team, multi-age and financially viable. There’s no good reason why these new clubs shouldn’t expand to manage the community use of schools’ indoor sports facilities; schools have proved themselves incapable of doing it properly for decades.

I yield to no-one in my belief that high-quality, attractive and accessible parks and similar greenspaces deliver huge benefits for local communities. But playing fields don’t. FIT’s logo says it all: a flat, boring, green desert whose biodiversity value is near zero with some trees in the background on a lovely, cloudless day – and not a soul in sight. Protecting football and rugby grass playing fields, as FIT wants, won’t provide councils with a legacy from the disastrous success of London’s Olympic bid but a millstone.

Kit Campbell is principal of Kit Campbell Associates, Edinburgh. Kit wrote the Companion Guide to PPG17 and has two national awards for his work on open space, sport and recreation planning across the UK.

The interview with Alison Moore-Gwyn was published in the September issue of *The Leisure Review* – Fields in Trust: Protecting the ‘Where’

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