Topic Paper 7: Sport and Recreation Summary

Introduction

Planning policies should protect, enhance and expand access to high-quality sport and recreation opportunities that support healthy, active and inclusive communities.

Context

Sport and recreation encompass a wide range of facilities and activities which contribute to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of Knowsley's residents. This includes leisure centres, sports halls, swimming pools, playing pitches, parks, green spaces and informal recreation opportunities such as walking, cycling and use of the borough's wider green infrastructure network.

Knowsley benefits from a varied network of sport and recreation assets distributed across the borough, including the Volair leisure network, strategic parks such as Stadt Moers Park, Court Hey Park and Halewood Park Triangle, and an extensive network of outdoor sports facilities. These assets support both organised sport and informal recreation whilst contributing to wider objectives relating to public health, social inclusion, biodiversity and climate resilience.

Despite these strengths, there remain challenges in ensuring all residents have good access to high-quality sport and recreation opportunities, as asserted by the National Planning Policy Framework. Accessibility can be influenced by the location of facilities, transport links, affordability and the quality of existing infrastructure. In some areas, particularly those experiencing higher levels of deprivation, barriers to participation can contribute to wider health inequalities.

Supporting participation in sport and physical activity is particularly important within Knowsley, where health outcomes are generally below national averages. Access to high-quality recreation facilities, parks and open spaces can help tackle physical inactivity, obesity and poor mental health whilst supporting healthier lifestyles and community wellbeing.

The borough is also expected to continue accommodating housing growth and regeneration projects over the Local Plan period. New development will need to ensure that appropriate sport, recreation and open space provision is secured alongside growth and that existing infrastructure remains capable of meeting future demand.

Key policies, plans and strategies

The National Planning Policy Framework seeks to promote healthy and safe communities by supporting access to high-quality inclusive open space, sport and recreation facilities and opportunities for physical activity, including active travel. It also establishes a strong presumption against the loss of existing sports facilities, playing fields and recreational land unless specific criteria are met.

Planning Practice Guidance highlights the importance of maintaining an up-to-date evidence base to understand existing and future needs for open space, sport and recreation provision. It also recognises the role that these assets play in supporting health, environmental and placemaking objectives.

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Spatial Development Strategy is being prepared, and it is likely to recognise the importance of green infrastructure, recreation facilities and open spaces in creating healthy, sustainable and inclusive communities. Policies are likely to seek to improve access to recreation opportunities, enhance green infrastructure networks and reduce health inequalities.

The Knowsley Council Plan 2025-2030 seeks to create thriving communities, reduce inequalities and ensure residents can access opportunities that improve quality of life and wellbeing.

The Knowsley Playing Pitch Strategy (2021) provides the principal evidence base for outdoor sports provision. Whilst overall provision is considered broadly sufficient to meet current demand, the study identifies quality deficiencies at several sites and recognises that future population growth and participation increases will place additional pressure on facilities. Demand for artificial grass pitches is also expected to increase.

The Knowsley Green Space Action Plan (2024-2030) establishes a framework for improving parks, open spaces and recreation facilities across the borough whilst supporting wider objectives relating to health, biodiversity, environmental resilience and placemaking.

The Knowsley Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (2025) supports the delivery of active travel infrastructure across the borough and recognises the important relationship between walking, cycling, recreation, public health and environmental sustainability.

Key issues to be addressed by the Local Plan

- Sport and Recreation Infrastructure – Knowsley benefits from a network of playing pitches, leisure facilities, parks, recreation grounds and open spaces that make an important contribution to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of residents. The Local Plan should establish an appropriate framework for protecting existing provision while supporting opportunities for enhancement and modernisation where needed.
- Quality of Existing Provision – While the overall quantity of sport and recreation provision is generally sufficient, there are variations in the quality of facilities, playing pitches and associated infrastructure across the borough. The Local Plan should support investment and improvements where deficiencies have been identified.
- Future Demand – Growth in housing and employment development will increase demand for sport, recreation and open space provision. The Local Plan should ensure that infrastructure requirements arising from new development are appropriately planned for and delivered.
- Outdoor Sports Facilities – Existing outdoor sports facilities, including playing pitches and artificial grass pitches, are important community assets. The Local Plan should support their retention, enhancement and, where evidence demonstrates a need, the provision of additional facilities to meet future demand.
- Parks and Green Spaces – Knowsley's parks, green spaces and wider green infrastructure network are significant assets that provide opportunities for recreation, leisure and active travel, whilst contributing to local character, biodiversity and climate resilience. The Local Plan should seek to safeguard these assets and identify opportunities for their enhancement and improved connectivity.
- Accessibility of Provision – Access to sport, recreation and open space facilities is not uniform across the borough. The spatial strategy should seek to ensure that new development is well served by existing provision and supports improvements where accessibility gaps are identified.
- Integration with New Development – Sport, recreation, open space and green infrastructure should be integrated into the design of new development and regeneration schemes to create healthy, attractive and sustainable communities.