

# BACK TO PLAY

BEYOND THE SEASON  
OF NO SPORT



GROUNDS  
MANAGEMENT  
ASSOCIATION



[thegma.org.uk](http://thegma.org.uk)



**SPORT CONTRIBUTES  
£39 BILLION TO THE UK'S  
ECONOMY – A SIGNIFICANT  
PORTION OF THIS IS FROM  
LOCAL GAMES.**

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# INTRODUCTION

**Sport is vital to our nation.**

**With 2020 going down in history as the season of no sport, Covid-19 has reminded us how intrinsic playing and watching sport is to the nation today.**

Playing sport has huge benefits, from physical and mental health, to building relationships and community cohesion locally. It's also a huge business, with sport contributing **£39 billion** to the UK's economy – a significant portion of this is from local games.<sup>1</sup>

Watching sport is also increasingly popular in the UK, drawing in a more diverse fan base than ever before. Viewing figures for sports like football and rugby have never been higher, with England's final defeat in the 2019 Rugby World Cup drawing in **79%** of the UK viewing audience,<sup>2</sup> and the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup seeing record-breaking viewing figures.<sup>3</sup> With cancellations and postponements the norm this year, the hours of TV normally dedicated to sport is now being filled with re-runs and classic sporting victories.

Despite the important role sport plays, we are facing a crisis at its very foundation. Austerity, alongside a lack of appreciation for and investment (time and funding) in local grass pitches – and the experts that maintain them – will limit hours of play across the country once play resumes.<sup>4</sup>

From professional level, to local Saturday leagues, many of our favourite sports are heavily dependent on natural turf pitches. The steady decline in both the quality and the number of pitches available will result in reduced capacity. Overplay of pitches due to demand from male and female players across all ages means sports like football, rugby and cricket will face challenges.

The demand for natural turf pitches and resulting overplay will be met with a backdrop of cuts to local services. With sports surfaces not valued as a statutory service, continued under-investment will result in poor playing experiences, unsafe pitches, more cancellations, and a loss in participation with longer term impacts.

An example of this can already be seen in the growth of women and children's sport. With priority traditionally given to senior adult male teams, others suffer disproportionately when it comes to finding pitches.

Without good quality grass pitches, not only will our nation's health and local communities suffer, but so will our talent offering when it comes to professional teams and leagues. Within a decade, the next Owen Farrell, Gareth Bale, Raheem Sterling, Steph Houghton, or Joe Root may not have a pitch to play on. This will, in turn, affect the investment and value of our nation's sports.

## Making sport possible

With proper investment, the decline can be averted, and sport can continue as we all hope following lockdown.

While there are already a number of pitch improvement programmes, including the successful 'Grounds & Natural Turf Investment Programme' (GaNTIP)<sup>5</sup>, more must be done to support grassroots sports and increase playability.

The Grounds Management Association (GMA) has a programme of training, resources and expertise to improve the quality of our grass pitches. By valuing grounds and the people that maintain them, the GMA wants to encourage individuals to enter the profession, as volunteers and as professionals, to keep pitches safe and playable, and sport possible once again.

We know that, if we improved existing grass pitches, almost **1,400,000** (1,376,252) more children could play rugby or football every week and **489,859** more could play cricket every season.<sup>6</sup>

That means **4,000,000** more children's football matches could happen every year on existing pitches.

This report highlights the state of the nation's grass pitches and the impact if immediate action is not taken. However, by investing more in grass pitches, GMA training and qualifications, and influencing a new generation of skilled grounds managers and volunteers, we can reverse this trend, save and improve our grass pitches, and enable sport to be played regularly on good quality pitches for both winter and summer sports.



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# THE STATE OF THE NATION'S PITCHES

In England today, we have around 56,891 rugby union and league, football, and cricket pitches. That's **one pitch for every 984 people**. Many of these pitches have historically been overplayed due to demand, resulting in a steady deterioration of existing grounds.

If this trend continues, the number of rugby, cricket and football matches played in England will have to be reduced over the next decade. The result being that **a fifth** of people who play rugby and football will be unable to play every week, and **more than half** of people who play cricket will see matches reduced.<sup>7</sup>

Within the next decade, almost three quarters of a million adults and young people will be affected weekly or seasonally, with the majority potentially finding themselves unable to play.

Whilst the number of pitches reduce, demand is increasing. **57% of children aged 7-18 and 30% of adults say they'd play more sport on grass surfaces if they could.**

If we are to keep up with this growing demand, or even meet that of existing teams, GMA's work in training grounds managers and volunteers and investing in existing local community grass pitches is vital.



"Through GaNTIP, we've found it costs an additional £2,500 on average to fix up a local pitch and train individual volunteers or grounds staff to maintain it. Of course, there are varying factors for each sports surface and GMA's Regional Pitch Advisors conduct a full assessment to understand the exact investment required."



**...A FIFTH OF PEOPLE WHO PLAY RUGBY AND FOOTBALL WILL BE UNABLE TO PLAY EVERY WEEK, AND MORE THAN HALF OF PEOPLE WHO PLAY CRICKET WILL SEE MATCHES REDUCED.**

## Definition:

Grounds Management Association's Grounds and Natural Turf Improvement Programme (GaNTIP), funded by the Football Foundation, The FA, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and supported by Sport England, raises the quality of pitches, increases capacity and participation levels, enhances player experience and educates volunteers in 'how to manage' the pitches, which is vital to long term sustainability.

**Geoff Webb, CEO, GMA**

"If you think about the number of players and spectators who can then enjoy the pitch every week once it's well maintained, it ends up costing very little per person. It's vital that sports bodies value and support grounds management as much as they do best practice in coaching or officiating. The benefits well maintained pitches bring to individuals, teams and the local community make it a no brainer."

**Geoff Webb, CEO, GMA**



**Currently...**



**...pitches can only accommodate one match per week<sup>8</sup>**

# THE EFFECT ON HEALTH

The experience of lockdown has reminded us of the huge benefits of being active, both physically and mentally. In a year where sport has been massively restricted, the benefits could not be clearer. But what's missing from the debate is how the accessibility to well maintained grounds needs to keep up with this demand for pitches, especially when play resumes.

Without enough well maintained sports surfaces, the impact on the health of individuals and teams could be catastrophic. It's estimated that physical inactivity already costs the NHS **£1.1 billion** a year and with a decline in playable grounds, this figure could rise.<sup>9</sup>

Physically, playing sport can reduce the risk of developing type two diabetes by **30-40%** and the risk of a range of medical conditions, including cancer, dementia, strokes, heart disease and depression.<sup>10</sup> Playing sport can improve sleep, increase energy levels, help maintain a healthy body weight, act as effective pain management, and improve quality of life in ageing.<sup>11</sup>

And it's not just physical health. In a national survey of over **4,000** adults and children, the GMA found that **64%** of adults said playing in a local sports league every week is good for mental health.<sup>12</sup> **51%** of children aged 7-18 said playing on local grass pitches was fun and **40%** said it was good for them.

With the national obesity crisis at an all-time high – **29%** of adults are obese, and **36%** are overweight – it's vital that when sport resumes, more individuals remain active and we ensure they have safe and good quality pitches to play on.<sup>13</sup>

**IT'S ESTIMATED THAT PHYSICAL INACTIVITY ALREADY COSTS THE NHS £1.1 BILLION A YEAR**

“

Playing for our community football team on Saturdays is a real highlight of my week. It's great for my mental and physical health, as it gets me outside for most of the day, doing some intense exercise whilst having fun with my teammates.”

**Ben Buckeldee, 25, Captain of Christchurch FC, community team in South London**

“

I've been goalkeeper for my local team since I was a kid. Playing football is an important part of my life – it helps me socialise and have a good craic when all the team gets together. As I've gotten older, playing is an important way of keeping active and a healthy way of releasing day to day stresses.”

**David Atherton, 29, Grey Horse FC – Division 1, Barnsley and District Sunday League**

“

Getting the pitch ready for game day is incredibly rewarding – I actually gave up coaching and managing a team to focus on volunteering as a groundsperson! It's very satisfying watching the teams play on a surface I've helped prepare, and knowing I've played a vital role in making sure the game can go ahead. I'd encourage anyone who loves sport to volunteer at their local grounds and get involved. It's a great way to stay active and meet new people, both in your local community, and in the grounds management community.”

**Wes Matthews, Grounds Manager at Cranfield United FC**

# PRIORITY PLAYERS

**Despite the recent uplift of women playing sport across all levels, the capacity to meet this demand is restricted by existing groups who have priority when it comes to booking pitches for their games and training. Male teams and leagues play at the best available times and usually on the best available pitch. In other instances, junior players are restricted by adult leagues or teams that get priority.**

There is already a supply and demand problem for women's sport. Nationally, over a quarter of adult women and **55%** of girls aged 7-18 would play more team sports on grass surfaces if they could – but often, there isn't the opportunity to so.

After the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, **605** new girls' youth teams and **260** women's clubs registered to play football the following season.<sup>14</sup> Even at the top, teams in the Women's Super League experience higher levels of cancellations than the Premier League because of pitch quality.<sup>15</sup>

In rugby union, there's been an **185%** increase in girls and women registered to play rugby in clubs in England in the last eight years, without accessibility to pitches keeping pace.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the growing popularity, **58%** of adults say they see more boys and men play local team sports on community pitches than girls and women.

Children as young as seven have noticed this disparity, too. A staggering **73%** see more boys play local team sports than girls in their area, and **66%** of children and **52%** of adults think local pitches are dominated by men and boys at peak times.

The next decade should see women's football growing in both standing and popularity, eventually coming to be as successful as the men's game. But with growing demand for pitches at every level, coupled with budgetary cuts, and now the impact long term of the closing down of sport due to Covid-19, overuse of our pitches will only lead to greater deterioration in pitch quality and availability. Put this alongside women's teams already struggling to get the best playing slots, women's sport will fall further behind men's teams once sport resumes, rather than moving up the way it should.

“

We have to win hearts and minds and it's not a quick fix. We have to convince the game that women's football is worth investing in”.<sup>17</sup>

**Baroness Sue Campbell, FA director of women's football**

“

Women get both worse times to play on pitches, and worse pitches. As captain at my University football team, I found that the boys' teams were always given preference over times to train, and what pitches to book.

“There was one instance where we had a game on one of the far pitches with no floodlights or netting on the goals. The boys' game at a closer location got cancelled, so we asked to swap to a higher standard pitch. We were told it wasn't possible, because they wanted to keep the grass in a good state for the boys' next game.”

**Liv Barnes, 24, ex-captain at university team**

# THE EFFECT ON OUR COMMUNITIES

Sport is a vital aspect of local communities. 57% of adults believe playing local team sports is a national past time, highlighting the role it plays in our national consciousness. With a sense of community growing during the Coronavirus crisis, there's a possibility that the desire for local sport will only increase.



Local grass pitches can be a hub for our communities; 64% of young people and almost half (48%) of adults would like to see more grass pitches in their area. However, without valuing and investing in these grounds, and training a new generation of grounds staff and volunteers to look after them, we're set to have even less safe and good quality grass pitches in the next decade.

Despite this, there are ways to turn the tide. Through GaNTIP, the 4,508 pitches visited this year saw a 42% reduction in cancellations and an 18% increase in match capacity. The programme also engaged with 1,165 volunteers, helping to not only improve sites immediately, but keep them well maintained.

Over a quarter of children aged 7-18 think playing team sports locally is good for their communities. For adults, over half (54%) think having teams play sport on community grass pitches has a positive impact on their area. Local grounds will also be a great way to get children playing outside, at low cost.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of community sport. Roles on local grounds can help address loneliness and a lack of physical activity in older years, showing that grounds management can also solve national societal issues.

Playing sport in the local community is widely seen as a way for people from different backgrounds to interact and integrate by taking part, volunteering and spectating. Sport England's Active Lives Survey found that playing sport brings people together, builds trust and reduces isolation.<sup>18</sup>

Almost every professional sports player in the UK, across every sport, began by playing on a community pitch. And almost every community pitch across the UK, relies on volunteers to maintain it. 45% of adults already think there are less pitches or grounds in their local area than there were when they were growing up. Without more volunteers, we risk losing not only a place for our communities to come together and play sport, but a vital part of our nation's identity.



Playing for my local team is a great opportunity to get to know people in the local area, building friendships beyond the weekly match.

"I think having grass pitches that we can play on in our local area is vital to keeping community football teams like ours going. It's something people definitely take for granted, and would sorely miss if they weren't there!"

**Ben Buckeldee, 25, Captain of Christchurch FC, community team in South London**



Playing in a team is far more rewarding than solo work in the gym. It's a great feeling to play a team sport at your local pitch, week in, week out. I feel proud and happy."

**Dhaval Rajani, 30, player for Sunday morning Stanmore team**

# MAKING SPORT POSSIBLE

Without grounds, the incredible benefits associated with sport will be lost to so many.

It's clear that urgent action is necessary to solve our national pitch crisis. With the right investment, training and care, an improvement and growth in grass surfaces could increase capacity and sports participation. It will also level gender and age inequality and support community cohesion across the whole of the UK when play resumes.

The GMA has set out a plan to how to make it happen:

## 1) Investing in our pitches

The Grounds and Natural Turf Improvement Programme (GaNTIP) is vital to improving our pitches. Through assessing pitches and educating volunteers in how to maintain them, GaNTIP is building the infrastructure within each sport to keep pitches playable.

The programme's work this year assessing 4,508 pitches over the course of 12-months, led to a 42% reduction in cancellations and an 18% increase in capacity.

84 of the pitches have improved in quality, meaning more teams and more matches will now be able to come back to play.

GaNTIP's work is proven to improve our football and cricket pitches nationally, and keeping Britain playing sport. With further funding, this programme could grow to improve the 38,800 pitches that are currently rated 'poor' or 'basic' by The FA and GMA National Pitch Grading Framework standards.

GaNTIP has...

**ASSESSED 4,508 PITCHES OVER 12-MONTHS LEADING TO A 42% REDUCTION IN CANCELLATIONS AND AN 18% INCREASE IN CAPACITY.**



GaNTIP has totally transformed our club. The number of teams playing football has more than doubled since we've had the pitches improved.

"Before we had the funding and were able to maintain the pitches, match postponements were regular as the pitch surface was appalling. This season, so far, we've only lost one weekend of match play and that was due to frost.

"Our club is now in a completely different place. Men, women, girls and boys all play at the club and it really has become the hub of the community."

**Andy Salt, Chair, Trubshaw Cross**



Our playing field was decimated by chafer grub damage and became unsafe. The site is a general recreational field – so both football and cricket are played.

"Due to GaNTIP funding and training, we've gone from two small pitches to seven full sized, good quality pitches. It's now a vibrant site, with people excited to play on it across all different ages."

**Sean Clixby, Chair of Broughton Community Sports Association (BCSA) Trustees**

## 2) Real grassroots of sport

A good quality pitch doesn't happen by accident. The skill, dedication and commitment of sports turf volunteers is often overlooked. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a man on a mower, modern day sports turf management offers an extremely rewarding occupation. Be it at a volunteer or professional level, grounds staff today learn the fundamentals of science, technology and innovation, as well as sports turf and horticulture skills.

Grounds managers integrate with the coaching teams and are a key component of professional sport today. Using data, research and evidence, grounds managers apply their varied knowledge to create the surfaces we enjoy as players.

Yet unfortunately, time is running out to secure the sector's future, and the result will have serious consequences for sport. The Grounds Management Association found that **one in five** grounds managers will be leaving the profession in the next **10 years**. It's an ageing sector with many close to retirement. **40%** of the workforce is over the age of 50, with the majority also being white and male. On top of this, over two thirds of our vital community grounds volunteers are over 60 and almost all are over 50.<sup>19</sup> This crisis further exacerbates the deterioration of pitches.

We need more people to enter the industry, both as professionals and volunteers. But with only 19% of children considering a job in grounds management, (a figure much lower for girls, at **15%** compared with **30%** for boys), we don't have the workforce to stop the crisis.

Over **90%** of those working in the sector are satisfied or very satisfied with their job. Additionally, over **90%** of head grounds staff have worked in the sector for more than **10 years**, highlighting high levels of job satisfaction.<sup>20</sup> It's imperative that more sport-loving young people enter the profession, creating a new generation of passionate and dedicated grounds managers.

As well as increasing recruitment in the professional sector, it's important that more volunteers look to support local pitches, even just for a couple of hours a month.



Grounds managers have a pivotal role to play across all sports. Without the hard work, attention to detail and dedication across all sectors, sport would not be played at all."

**John Ledwidge, Head of Sports Turf and Grounds, Leicester City Football Club**



The backbone of maintaining our pitches is a core team of five volunteers. We do the day-to-day pitch maintenance. Four out of the five of us have done GMA level 1 training.

"What motivates me to volunteer is doing it for the kids – you want them to have something good to play on so they can get maximum enjoyment out of training and playing. Then, once you get into it, pride kicks in and you want to have the best possible pitches.

"At our club, we've had over 1,500 volunteer hours in a 12-month period."

**Andy Salt, Chairman Trubshaw Cross**



I volunteer because I can see the huge benefits in taking control of the facilities we use. We have seen huge increases in participation, fewer postponements of matches but, most of all, can accommodate the massive increase in demand for boys and girls' local grassroots football.

"I think it's important because there isn't the funding or willingness from local and national government to deliver enough playable outside spaces. This reduces participation, which leads to obvious consequences for physical and mental health and could increase potential social issues, with greater numbers of children and young adults failing to find positive outlets for their energies.

"I enjoy working in and improving areas in the great outdoors, at the same time as enjoying great friendships and teamworking."

**Robert Hill, Chair, Woburn and Wavendon FC**

# GET INVOLVED

**Sport is a cornerstone in our communities, our identities and our lives. Help us ensure sport is possible for everyone, wherever and whoever they are. Get involved today.**

## Volunteering

Since Covid-19, we've seen hundreds of thousands of people volunteering to help out in their community, be that through signing up to support the NHS, or just helping out an elderly neighbour. It's vital that this spirit continues once sport resumes.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of sport. Without the thousands of volunteers who give up their time, grassroots sport would not exist.

Matches and training simply cannot take place unless there is a suitable playing surface. Poor quality pitches only offer a poor quality experience for players and are often a barrier to them achieving their real potential. Clubs need great pitches, and they need grounds volunteers to make that possible.

### What does a grounds volunteer do?

There are a wide range of grounds care activities, from line-marking, to pitch renovations to working with experienced grounds contractors.

For some initial information on the tasks involved in caring for natural turf pitches, see: [www. groundsmanship.co.uk/](http://www.groundsmanship.co.uk/)

### How to get involved

Whilst play is currently restricted, it's possible to take the first step in becoming a volunteer right now.

We recommend firstly getting in touch with us to register your interest in our introductory grassroots volunteer online learning at [learning@thegma.org.uk](mailto:learning@thegma.org.uk). The training helps upskill knowledge of natural turf and working on sports surfaces, ensuring that the time you invest as a volunteer is well-spent.

The GMA also runs a range of online courses aimed at volunteers and professionals, which allow you to get ready for the next season across all levels of sport. The training targets sport specific courses, however additional options are available via sport NGBs (National Governing Bodies) too.

Find out more here: [www.thegma.org.uk](http://www.thegma.org.uk)

Staff from the National Governing Bodies of the different sports can also point you in the right direction. Alternatively, get in touch with Sport England to find out more about volunteering in your area: [www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/volunteering-qa](http://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/volunteering-qa)

If you are already a member of a club, ask a committee member or existing grounds volunteers.

### Football

To volunteer in football and find a club near you: [www.thefa.com/get-involved/player](http://www.thefa.com/get-involved/player)  
To find the contact details of your county's Football Association: [www.thefa.com/about-football-association/who-we-are/county-fas](http://www.thefa.com/about-football-association/who-we-are/county-fas)

### Cricket

To volunteer in cricket and find a club near you: [www. play-cricket.com/](http://www.play-cricket.com/)  
To find the contact details of your local County Cricket Board: [www.ecb.co.uk/county-cricket-boards](http://www.ecb.co.uk/county-cricket-boards)

### Rugby Union

To volunteer in Rugby Union and find a club near you: [www.englandrugby.com/find-rugby](http://www.englandrugby.com/find-rugby)  
To join Groundsmen Connected, to connect with other grounds volunteers: [www.englandrugby.com/participation/running-your-club/facilities/natural-turf-pitches](http://www.englandrugby.com/participation/running-your-club/facilities/natural-turf-pitches)

### Rugby League

To volunteer in Rugby League and find a club near you, email: [players@rfl.co.uk](mailto:players@rfl.co.uk)  
Or contact the Rugby Football League headquarters on: **0330 111113**

## Enter the profession

The Grounds Management Association is the leading not for profit organisation for all grounds professionals and volunteers. As part of the organisation's objective to lift the profile and professionalism of the sector GMA is encouraging Sport England to ask major National Governing Bodies of Sport [NGB's] to include a Grounds Management Strategy as part of their next funding bid for the period 2022-2026. This would be a significant step in putting Grounds Management on a par alongside other workforce development areas such as coach development and education, talent development, technical officials and volunteering.

In the interim period, GMA will continue to publish high quality technical guidance and provide positive Grounds Management Guidance through the Grounds and Natural Turf Improvement Programme (GaNTIP).

If you'd like to find out more about becoming a GMA member, the profession, and how to enter it, contact us at GMA. See the GMA's website: [www.thegma.org.uk/learning/careers/career-advice](http://www.thegma.org.uk/learning/careers/career-advice)  
Email us: [careeradvice@thegma.org.uk](mailto:careeradvice@thegma.org.uk)  
Or call: **01908 312 511**

# APPENDIX

All calculations have been developed using a random sample of Playing Pitch Strategies and the GMA's own GaNTIP data for football, and are rough guides. These can be found here: [www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/planning-for-sport#assessing\\_needs\\_and\\_playing\\_pitch\\_strategy\\_guidance](http://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/planning-for-sport#assessing_needs_and_playing_pitch_strategy_guidance)

Information on the total number of pitches for each sport was taken from Sport England's Active Places database as part of the Industry Research Project: [www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/planning-for-sport/active-places-power](http://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/planning-for-sport/active-places-power)

## Football and rugby – playing capacity

Poor pitch: 1 match equivalent a week  
Standard or basic pitch: 2 match equivalents a week  
Good pitch: 3 match equivalents a week

## Cricket – playing capacity

Poor pitch: 1 match equivalent a season  
Standard pitch: 3 match equivalents a season  
Good pitch: 5 match equivalents a season

## Players

22 football players involved in a match  
36 rugby union players are involved in a match  
32 rugby league players are involved in a match  
22 cricket players are involved in a match

## Football:

25% (10,000) of football pitches are poor  
72% (28,800) of football pitches are basic  
Approximately 40,000 football pitches in total

## Rugby Union

26% (1,960) of rugby union pitches are poor  
47% (3,460) of rugby union pitches are standard

## Rugby league

47% (400) of rugby league pitches are poor  
42% (357) of rugby league pitches are standard

## Cricket

10% (931) of cricket pitches are poor  
43% (3,705) of cricket pitches are standard

## Deterioration impact:

Number of 'good' football/rugby pitches x number of matches a week/season on standard/basic pitches x 40 weeks = number of matches lost if pitches deteriorated

Number of matches that would be lost if pitches deteriorated x number of players who play weekly = number of players that would miss out on matches if pitches deteriorated

## Improvement impact:

Number of poor pitches x 2 extra matches x 40 weeks = extra m/e per year on poor pitches

Number of basic/standard pitches x 1 extra match x 40 weeks = extra m/e per year on basic pitches

Number of extra matches x number of players = number of extra adult players who could play per week/season

Number of extra adult players who could play per week/season x 2 = number of extra junior players would could play per week/season

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