# RUGBY LEAGUE

## Interim Works and Fit for Play

Wednesday 13th May 2020

Grassroots playing facilities will currently have many questions about the current and potential restrictions the Government may impose to reduce the transmission of Coronavirus with regards to rugby league playing surfaces, their ongoing maintenance and what works may be carried out to provide a fit for play surface when sport resumes.

This document sets out what may happen to Rugby League playing surfaces and the soils beneath should they be left alone for lengthy periods, what can currently be done to maintain them and also what works can be carried out should a play resume.

**Please ensure you always follow government guidelines (www.gov.uk/coronavirus) should you be permitted to work outdoors either as lone workers or as part of a team.**

### Grassroots playing surfaces may be maintained by the following category of people:

**Professional managers and staff** are advised to continue to actively consult and discuss working practices with their employers, who should ensure all employees are informed of and are following Government guidelines. Subject to Government policy, your employer should determine with you whether your continued work is necessary, essential and/or safe.

**Self-employed grounds staff or contractors** are advised to follow the latest Government guidelines, formulate an agreed plan that includes your safe working procedure, and clearly communicate with clients in advance and agree safe working procedures. We advise regular review as Government guidelines develop. Ultimately it is your decision to suspend operations or, to continue to work. The emphasis though is to ensure safe working practices, as communicated by Government. Make plans now for the future and reschedule appointments where you can and keep reassessing this in order that when restrictions are lifted you are able then to return to projects that may have been suspended.

**Volunteers** should follow latest Government guidelines and not put themselves or others at risk. We advise that the volunteer network monitors the timings of any announcements of the various sports re opening for play, however realistically this will be dependent on how we are able to slow the virus down and return to normality.

**The main question you may have is about mowing. Here are some suggestions for you to follow.**

**Mowing heights of cut during non-play**

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| Suggested HoC | How much to remove | Frequency (where possible) | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| 40-50mm | Max 1/3rd | 1 x per week, where possible | During a cold snap/drought frequency of cutting could be reduced. Cut in dry conditions- avoid full heat of day |

**Why am I leaving the grass longer than usual?** With reduced wear and tear on the grass and no need to provide a player experience as it is out of use then the longer the grass can be the better, within reason. This increased height will result in the grass being under a lot less stress and more drought tolerant, it will be slightly more of an open sward (less thick) which will reduce disease pressures (less humidity amongst the leaves) and will encourage greater root growth as more leaf means more food produced by photosynthesis.

Consideration should be given to removal of grass clippings, as all waste disposal sites are now closed. Letting clippings fly should be considered as a more appropriate action.

**What may happen if I do not cut the grass at all?** The grass will grow very tall, the surface will become very thin, it will try to set seed, and this will result in an even thinner surface. It will be a challenge to get the surface back into a suitable playing surface when we can start playing sport again.

## Other tasks you may be able to carry out:

### 1: Control or removal of thatch

**Why should I do this if play is not taking place**? Grass leaves and sheaths do die off on a regular basis and these will build-up at the base of the plant. Surface grooming using chain harrow or tractor mounted rake, can help keep the surface clean and prevent build up. Where scarification is concerned be cautious when the weather is hot and dry.

### 2: Aeration

**Should I do this at all if no play is taking place?** Carrying out aeration or decompaction works, will help the surface but only if ground conditions are suitable. If it becomes too dry, then the tines won't go into the soil very well so it would be best to wait until the ground has softened some more. Don't aerate when it is too wet though. Be aware that increased aeration will encourage grass growth. If you can do this early in the process it will aid the extension of roots and the benefits this will give in respect to improvement of soil structure.

**If I can do this, how will it help the soil?** It will increase infiltration rates; roots will be able to explore more of the soil profile and this will help produce a surface which can better withstand wear and tear when play starts up again.

### Carrying out aeration will help with the following benefits:

- Improves water uptake.
- Improves nutrient uptake.
- Reduces water runoff and puddling
- Encourages stronger roots.
- Reduces soil compaction.
- Improves drought stress tolerance

## 3: Fertilising

**Should I do this if no play is taking place?** In many cases there will not be a need to apply a fertiliser as the grass will grow naturally, it won't need to recover from wear and tear and we don't want it too dense or fast growing as this can increase disease attack and associated mowing and scarification requirements. Fertilising will encourage grass growth, and ultimately make keeping on top of the grass cutting an even greater challenge during this period of minimal maintenance.

## 4: Weeds

**At the grass roots level, we must readily accept that weeds are part of everyday life on the playing surface.** The soil contains many viable weed and grass seeds, and some will germinate. Normally they need space to do this in so if you can minimise bare patches and brush off worm casts quickly weed invasion will be slowed down.

If a significant problem, an application of selective herbicide can be applied by a suitably qualified person, the period of application for this is typically from May to September. As with all operations, consider whether this is an essential practice during this period of restricted movement.

**What could be the potential outcome if I do the minimum work and how can I overcome this?** If left with minimal or no maintenance then inevitably any playing surface will be affected detrimentally, the major issue will be with the pitch being overgrown and weed populated. However, the surface will not be beyond repair and it will be able to be back in a playable condition in a fairly short period of time. It will be important that you have a plan in place and ready to go for when the restrictions are lifted. This will include ordering products, machinery and equipment, organising a working group and employing contractors if needed.

## 5: Local repairs to playing surfaces

Where possible, and where resources permit take time to repair those areas that have always caused issues. This would typically be light renovations by hand forking (or machine if a large area), a light fertiliser application, over-seeding and light top-dressing of thin areas, followed up with regular watering to aid germination and establishment.

## 6: Irrigation

**Should I do this if no play is taking place?** Water plays a major part in ensuring grass growth especially during the establishment phase of development following repairs or

renovation. Irrigation should be carried out as and when needed as indicated by weather conditions.

Do not over irrigate. Too much water will affect the turfgrass growth and may also affect the soil conditions to the extent that compaction occurs with subsequent maintenance operations.
If your ability to irrigate is limited focus on those areas with the weakest turfgrass growth or newly sown grass.

**How can I get my playing surface back to a 'fit for play' condition should a ban on play be lifted?**
It is important that some form of reduced but regular maintenance work has been carried out during this period so that a gradual reduction in mowing height over say a 2-week period can be achieved easily. Alongside this, a gradual increase in other maintenance activities including a fertiliser application will help to produce a suitable playing surface more quickly. The actual length of time needed to become fully playable and to what standard will also depend on the condition of the surface in the first place alongside weather and ground conditions.

### See below a list of potential actions:

- If grass length is too long, scarify or flail mow to cut down vegetation, remove some thatch, surface debris and unwanted grasses. Arisings should be collected where possible.
- Chain harrow with rough side down to level any areas as best as possible and create a seed bed.
- Application of selective herbicide.  Via accredited contractor.
- Introduce a regular mowing regime to encourage rejuvenation of the grasses.
- If required: over-seed using a perennial ryegrass mix of at least 3 cultivars. Apply with a drill seeder at a rate of 30 - 40 gms per square metre minimum of 3 directions. Check and keep seed labels. Perennial ryegrass will read as *Lolium perenne* (Latin name).
- Fertiliser- arrange for a fertiliser representative to carry out at soil analysis and devise a fertiliser programme tailored to your pitch.

Pitches that were not repaired following the last game played before the introduction of the current Government measures may have ruts and divots that have now dried out and solidified over this recent dry period causing the surface to become potentially unsafe. The rutted ground may now be covered over by grass, it is important before returning to play that a thorough inspection is carried to identify and repair any problem areas.

## CLOSING STATEMENT

Please always ensure you adhere to up to date government guidelines (www.gov.uk/coronavirus) regarding the current situation.

The main message to Rugby League ground staff / volunteers is to ideally continue with all, or most, of the typical good maintenance practices but at a reduced intensity to meet the needs of your particular pitch.

An ongoing dialogue with your club and leagues will be necessary to ensure sufficient lead in time to get the surface safe and match ready.