NATURAL TURF ALLIANCE

Public Sporting Fields Should Benefit the Whole Community

Public sporting fields are publicly funded community assets that provide far more than organised sport. Good planning should maximise benefits for the whole community by balancing recreation, health, environmental sustainability, education and sporting participation. Best-practice natural turf remains the most effective way to achieve these outcomes.

Why This Matters

Public sporting fields are among the most valuable assets owned by local councils. They provide places for organised sport, but they also support schools, families, walkers, community events, informal recreation, environmental sustainability and neighbourhood wellbeing. Every resident contributes to these facilities through their rates, making it important that they remain accessible, welcoming and beneficial to the entire community.

As populations grow and demand for sporting facilities increases, planning discussions often focus almost exclusively on how many hours a sporting club can use a field. While organised sport is an important part of community life, this approach risks overlooking the broader purpose of public open space.

The NSW Chief Scientist and the NSW Best Practice Guidelines both recognise that sporting fields are multi-purpose community assets that deliver social, environmental and health benefits well beyond organised competition. They encourage councils to consider the full range of community outcomes when planning, upgrading and managing sporting fields.

The question for councils should therefore not be, "How many additional sporting hours can this field provide?" but rather, "How can this public asset deliver the greatest long-term benefit for the whole community?"

Best-practice natural turf provides an opportunity to achieve both objectives— supporting organised sport while preserving the environmental, recreational and community values that make public open space such an important part of Australian neighbourhoods.

1. The Evidence

Sporting fields serve many purposes

Independent government guidance recognises that public sporting fields provide value far beyond organised sport. They contribute to healthier communities by supporting:

- organised sporting competitions and training
- school physical education and recreation
- informal games and active play
- walking, jogging and personal fitness
- family recreation
- community gatherings and local events
- biodiversity and urban cooling
- visual amenity and neighbourhood character.

Unlike privately operated sporting facilities, public sporting fields are intended to serve many different users throughout the day, across different seasons and at every stage of life.

Community benefit is broader than bookings

The NSW Best Practice Guidelines caution against relying on booked hours as a measure of field performance or community benefit.

The Guidelines note that actual field use often differs significantly from booking schedules and that wear is influenced by factors such as player numbers, activity type, intensity and weather conditions. Two fields with similar bookings may experience dramatically different levels of use and wear.

Similarly, community value cannot be measured simply by the number of registered players attached to one sporting code. Many people benefit from sporting fields without belonging to a club or appearing in participation statistics.

Public open space is becoming increasingly valuable

As urban development continues, publicly accessible green space is becoming more limited.

The NSW Chief Scientist describes public open space as critical community infrastructure that supports physical activity, social interaction, environmental sustainability and community wellbeing.

This makes every hectare of public sporting land increasingly important, not only for organised sport but for the wider community.

2. Understanding the Issue

Sporting clubs understandably seek additional access to sporting fields as participation grows. However, councils have a broader responsibility than simply meeting the needs of individual user groups

Public sporting fields are funded by the entire community and should therefore be planned for the benefit of the entire community.

This distinction is important.

A field used by football clubs for several evenings each week may also be used every weekday by local schools, visited by families during weekends, enjoyed by walkers every morning and provide valuable green space that improves local biodiversity and reduces urban heat.

None of these benefits are reflected in sporting participation statistics, yet each contributes significantly to community wellbeing.

Planning decisions can sometimes become dominated by the demands of a single sporting code. As booking schedules increase, facilities may gradually evolve into de facto exclusive sporting venues through extended training hours, specialist infrastructure and reduced opportunities for informal community use.

Good planning avoids this outcome.
Instead, councils should seek to balance the needs of organised sport with the broader role that public sporting fields play in supporting healthy, connected and resilient communities.

This balanced approach reflects both the intent of public open space planning and the expectations of the communities that fund these facilities.

3. Impacts and Implications

Community Access

Public sporting fields should remain accessible to everyone.
When facilities become increasingly dedicated to one sporting code, opportunities for schools, families, casual recreation and community events can gradually diminish.

Maintaining flexible community access ensures these assets continue delivering value to the widest possible range of residents.

Health and Wellbeing

Natural green spaces encourage physical activity for people of all ages.
Children playing informally, older residents walking for exercise, families enjoying open space and individuals participating in recreational activities all benefit from accessible sporting fields.

These everyday activities often involve far more people than organised sporting competitions.

Environmental Benefits

Best-practice natural turf contributes to cooler neighbourhoods, improved stormwater management, biodiversity and healthier urban environments.
These environmental services provide ongoing value to surrounding communities while supporting organised sport on the same land.

Protecting these broader benefits strengthens the resilience and sustainability of public open space.

Financial Value

Public investment should deliver the greatest possible return for ratepayers.
Evaluating sporting fields solely through the lens of sporting participation risks overlooking the broader social, environmental and recreational benefits that natural turf provides every day.

Considering whole-of-community outcomes helps councils make better long-term investment decisions.

Better Community Outcomes

Communities benefit most when sporting fields remain flexible.
A field capable of supporting organised sport, school activities, community events and informal recreation delivers significantly greater public value than one designed primarily around the needs of a single user group.

4. Best Practice Approach

Modern sporting field planning recognises that public open space performs many functions simultaneously.
Best practice begins by acknowledging that organised sport is only one of many important community outcomes.

Councils should evaluate proposals by considering:

- community access and equity
- sporting participation
- environmental sustainability
- public health and wellbeing
- long-term asset performance
- financial responsibility
- resilience to future community needs

The NSW Best Practice Guidelines encourage councils to improve the performance of natural turf through better design, drainage, irrigation and maintenance rather than viewing surface replacement as the primary solution to increased demand.

Modern natural turf systems are capable of supporting substantially greater use than older fields while continuing to provide the environmental and community benefits associated with living green space.

Most importantly, good planning seeks balance.
Rather than maximising access for one sporting code, it seeks to maximise the overall public benefit delivered by publicly funded land.

That approach ensures community assets continue serving current and future generations.

5. Recommendations

1. **Recognise** public sporting fields as multi-purpose community assets that serve the whole community.

2. **Evaluate** proposals using whole-of-community outcomes rather than sporting participation alone.

3. **Protect** equitable access for schools, families, informal recreation and community events.

4. **Invest** in best-practice natural turf to improve capacity while maintaining environmental and social benefits.

5. **Base** planning decisions on independent evidence and long-term community value

Key Takeaways

Public assets matter
Public sporting fields should deliver benefits for the entire community, not only organised sport

Community comes first
Councils have a responsibility to balance the needs of all users of public open space.

Value is broader
Community benefit extends well beyond booked hours and registered player numbers.

Better planning
Evidence-based decisions consider health, environment, recreation and long-term community outcomes.

Natural turf delivers
Best-practice natural turf supports organised sport while preserving the wider benefits of public green space.

"Public open space provides benefits that extend well beyond organised sport, supporting recreation, health, environmental sustainability and community wellbeing."
Adapted from the NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer's Independent Review into the Design, Use and Impacts of Synthetic Turf in Public Open Space.

References

1. NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer. Independent Review into the Design, Use and Impacts of Synthetic Turf in Public Open Space.

2. NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Best Practice Guidelines for Sporting Fields.

3. NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Division 5.1 Guidelines Addendum for Synthetic Turf Sports Fields.

4. World Health Organization. Urban Green Spaces and Health.

5. Parks and Leisure Australia. Principles for Planning and Managing Community Open Space.

Visit the NTA Document library: **https://naturalturfalliance.org/document-library/**

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This Fact Sheet has been developed with the support of Lawn Solutions Australia, the nation's largest network of turf specialists.
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Natural Turf Alliance Inc (NTA) is a Registered Association consisting of community groups committed to preserving and developing natural grass open spaces including sporting fields.
Our core focus is engaging with local councils and sporting groups in relation to best practice natural turf construction and maintenance.