NATURAL TURF ALLIANCE

Before Council Decides: Ten Questions Every Community Should Ask

A sporting field decision can commit a community to decades of cost, environmental impacts and changes to public access. Before a surface is selected, residents should be able to see the evidence, understand the alternatives and test the reasons for council's preferred option.

Why This Matters

Communities are often asked to respond to a proposal after its main design choices have already been made. Consultation is more useful when residents can examine the problem being solved, the options considered and the assumptions supporting the recommendation.

The right questions help move the discussion beyond competing claims about grass and plastic. They ask whether the proposal meets a demonstrated need, whether best-practice natural turf has been properly assessed and whether the full consequences are understood.

This fact sheet offers ten practical questions, together with the documents communities should request. It can be used to prepare a submission, speak at a public forum or seek a written response from council.

Ask for the evidence behind the answer. A clear explanation should identify the source, assumptions, limitations and person responsible for the assessment.

1. The Evidence: NSW Government Guidance

The January 2025 Best-practice guidelines for sporting fields support assessment of contemporary natural turf systems, actual wear, lifecycle affordability and independent technical advice. Booked hours should not be used to estimate wear. [1]

The May 2025 synthetic turf guidance addresses surface selection, environmental risks and lifecycle costs. Its assessment addendum states that synthetic fields should not be located in areas of extreme flood risk. [2, 3]

For relevant development without consent under Part 5, the NSW Government says determining authorities must apply the synthetic turf addendum when preparing a review of environmental factors (REF). Ask council to identify the planning pathway and applicable assessment requirements. [4]

2. Understanding the Issue: Questions 1-4

1. What sporting need are we actually solving?

Ask for actual attendance, player numbers, field condition, seasonal patterns and evidence of unmet demand. Separate blanket bookings from genuine use. Are problems caused by the surface, maintenance, scheduling, lighting or lack of access to other fields?

Request: usage and demand study, booking-versus-attendance data, field-condition assessment and demand forecasts.

2. Has best-practice natural turf been assessed fairly?

Ask for an independently designed option using suitable soils, turf cultivars, drainage, irrigation and maintenance. Compare it with the proposed synthetic system against the same need. An old oval in poor condition is not a fair substitute for a modern natural turf option. [1]

Request: natural turf design, independent soil and drainage assessment, performance assumptions and explanation of alignment with the 2025 guidelines.

3. What will each option cost over its full life?

Ask for a common 30-year comparison covering construction, maintenance, repairs, renewal and disposal. Show shared infrastructure separately. Explain any departure from NSW guidance: its high-wear comparison rates best-practice natural turf lifecycle costs below synthetic turf. [1, 2]

Request: lifecycle model, independent estimates, renewal timetable, assumptions, exclusions and future funding plan.

4. Is the surface suitable for this site’s flood risk?

Ask how flood depth, velocity, duration and effects on neighbours have been assessed. Where synthetic turf is proposed, require a response to the Government’s direction against locations with extreme flood risk. Natural turf guidance identifies best-practice fields as well suited to flood-prone sites. [1, 3]

Request: flood study, assessment of the proposed design, emergency agency advice where relevant and explanation of residual risks.

3. Impacts and Implications: Questions 5-8

5. Has the environmental assessment been completed?

Ask council to identify the planning pathway, assessment documents and how the relevant NSW synthetic turf guidance has been addressed. The assessment should examine the actual site, including waterways, soil, biodiversity and cumulative impacts. A generic product statement does not explain site impacts.

Request: REF or other applicable assessment, specialist reports, alternatives analysis and response to the assessment addendum. [3, 4]

6. How will heat affect safety and usable playing time?

Ask for an assessment of summer conditions, surface heat and player exposure. What triggers a closure or restriction? Who measures conditions and enforces the policy? Include heat-related lost hours when assessing the claimed benefit of a new surface.

Request: heat assessment, operating policy, monitoring method, closure assumptions and responsibility for decisions.

7. How will pollution be prevented and monitored?

For synthetic turf, ask how fibres, infill and any contaminants will be contained during normal use, cleaning and storms. Identify what happens when controls fail or floodwater bypasses them. Product claims should be supported by relevant test evidence and clearly stated limitations.

Request: material specifications, relevant laboratory reports, drainage and containment design, monitoring plan and maintenance budget.

8. What will change for the wider community?

Ask how informal recreation, school use, dog walking, accessibility, shade and quiet enjoyment will be affected. Examine fencing, booking rules, lighting and operating hours. Include people who use the park without joining a sporting club.

Request: public access plan, proposed operating rules, lighting and noise assessments, and consultation findings for different user groups.

4. Best Practice Approach: Questions 9-10

9. Who has independently checked the proposal?

Ask whether suitably qualified advisers have reviewed demand, natural turf design, cost, flood and environmental assumptions. Request declared conflicts of interest and distinguish independent review from advice supplied by a product vendor or project proponent.

Request: adviser qualifications, terms of engagement, conflict declarations, peer reviews and council's responses to recommendations.

10. Who is responsible after the field opens?

Ask who funds and carries out maintenance, monitoring, repairs and replacement. What happens if capacity, costs or environmental performance differ from forecasts? Identify review dates, public reporting and the triggers for corrective action.

Request: asset and maintenance plans, warranties, insurance terms, replacement funding, performance measures and reporting commitments.

5. Recommendations

Ask council to publish a consolidated response to these ten questions before the final decision. Each response should link to the relevant evidence, identify remaining uncertainties and explain how community feedback affected the recommendation.

NTA recommends seeking further assessment where a material question remains unanswered. A decision timetable should allow councillors and residents to review the evidence and compare a credible best-practice natural turf option.

Key Takeaways

Start with the need

Confirm actual demand before accepting a preferred technology.

Ask for comparable evidence

Test the natural turf option, full costs and site risks on equal terms.

Secure accountability

Identify who pays, who monitors and what happens if the project falls short.

"A community should be able to understand the evidence before it is asked to accept the decision."

References

1. NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Best-practice guidelines for sporting fields. January 2025. Section 2.1: wear; section 4.3.1, pp. 30-31: floods; Table 11, p. 37: high-wear comparisons; section 5: planning and design.

https://www.water.dcceew.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-07/best-practice-guidelines-for-sporting-fields%20%281%29_0.pdf

2. NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. Synthetic turf sports fields in public open space - Guideline for decision-makers. May 2025. Environmental, social and economic considerations.

https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-05/synthetic-turf-sports-fields-in-public-open-space-guideline-for-decision-makers.pdf

3. NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. Guidelines for Division 5.1 assessments - Addendum for synthetic turf sports fields. May 2025. Sections 2.1-2.6; section 2.1.2, p. 12: extreme flood risk.

https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-05/guidelines-for-division-5.1-assessments-addendum-for-synthetic-turf-sports-fields.pdf

4. NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. Synthetic turf for sports fields. Explains the scope and application of the guidance.

https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/the-planning-system/open-space/synthetic-turf-for-sports-fields

Visit the NTA Document Library:

https://naturalturfalliance.org/document-library/

Prepared October 2026. These questions and document requests are NTA recommendations for transparent decision-making. Not every document title or assessment applies to every project; council should explain the relevant pathway and provide the equivalent evidence. Page references are printed document pages.

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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.