NATURAL TURF ALLIANCE

The True Cost of a Sporting Field: Looking Beyond Construction

Best-practice natural turf offers a significant long-term cost advantage over synthetic turf. NSW Government guidance identifies lower typical construction costs, while its high-wear field comparison rates natural turf lifecycle costs substantially below synthetic turf. Councils should assess this financial benefit before committing ratepayers to repeated synthetic surface replacement. [1, 2]

Why This Matters

Choosing best-practice natural turf can reduce the financial commitment required to provide community sport. The advantage extends beyond the initial build: a living surface can be maintained and locally repaired without the recurring obligation to remove and replace an entire synthetic carpet.

Routine maintenance is necessary for both surfaces. Even where a synthetic option promises savings on mowing or irrigation, those savings must be weighed against specialist repairs, carpet renewal, removal and disposal. Looking only at annual upkeep can conceal a much larger long-term bill.

The comparison must be between options that meet the same sporting need on the same site. It should include a properly designed best-practice natural turf option, rather than assuming the performance of an ageing or poorly maintained oval.

The key question is whether the additional cost of synthetic turf is justified when a best-practice natural field can meet the demonstrated sporting need.

1. The Evidence: NSW Government Guidance

The Synthetic turf sports fields in public open space - Guideline for decision-makers (May 2025), page 21, says a well-constructed natural turf field typically costs less than one-third of a synthetic field. This is a general capital-cost benchmark, not a guaranteed saving for every site. [1]

The same guidance requires assessment of installation, upkeep, repairs, management, disposal and replacement. It identifies higher synthetic repair and renewal costs and the need to budget for end-of-life disposal. These recurring costs are central to natural turf's long-term financial advantage. [1]

1. The Evidence (continued)

The Best-practice guidelines for sporting fields (January 2025), Table 11, printed page 37, compares fields accommodating high or extreme wear. It rates lifecycle costs for best-practice natural turf using amended site soil as “Low to moderate”, versus “Very high” for synthetic turf. Both have “High” carrying capacity. [2]

This is a substantial difference in the Government’s cost ratings for fields serving high-wear sporting needs. The table supports making the long-term savings from best-practice natural turf a central part of the investment decision. [2]

These are comparative ratings, not dollar estimates or a fixed percentage saving. Independent site costing should quantify the advantage and explain any result that departs materially from the Government’s benchmarks. Construction scope, actual wear and maintenance standards must remain comparable.

2. Understanding the Issue

Separate common works from surface-specific costs

Lighting, amenities, access improvements and some flood-management works may be needed under either option. Show these separately from soil preparation, turf establishment, synthetic carpet, shockpad and surface-specific containment. Otherwise the headline total can obscure the actual price difference.

Use the same period and price assumptions

NTA recommends a 30-year comparison for community field decisions. Apply the same base date, inflation assumptions, treatment of GST and discounting method to both options. Show annual cash requirements alongside discounted totals so future funding needs remain visible.

Service life is an assumption to test

If a synthetic carpet is assumed to last eight years, a 30-year model would include renewals at years 8, 16 and 24. A ten-year assumption gives renewals at years 10 and 20. These are illustrative scenarios, not universal replacement intervals. Obtain evidence for the proposed product and expected use.

Identify which components are replaced at each renewal. Carpet, infill, shockpad and drainage do not necessarily have the same service life.

3. Impacts and Implications

Maintenance must be funded, not assumed

For natural turf, price mowing, irrigation, fertiliser, aeration, weed management and local repairs to the standard required. For synthetic turf, price grooming, cleaning, infill management, inspections, repairs and environmental controls. Include labour, equipment and contractor costs consistently.

Natural turf avoids repeated synthetic carpet purchases

A properly managed natural turf system renews its grass through growth and targeted repair. It still needs maintenance and occasional infrastructure renewal, but does not require a new manufactured carpet whenever a synthetic surface reaches the end of its useful life. Over decades, avoiding repeated carpet purchases, installation and disposal can create a major cost advantage.

Disruption has a cost

Assess closures for construction, planned renewal and realistic weather-related events. Identify alternative venues and any extra travel or hire costs. Use actual demand and credible usable hours when calculating cost per playing hour, rather than assuming every available hour will be used.

Grants change who pays, not what the field costs

Show both the total project cost and the council's funding share. A capital grant may make an option easier to build while leaving its maintenance and renewal burden unchanged. Identify any grant conditions and which future costs remain with ratepayers.

4. Best Practice Approach

Commission an independent comparison with a clear scope, a common appraisal period and a funded maintenance standard. Include upgrading the existing natural field where feasible, as well as full reconstruction and the proposed synthetic system.

List assumptions and exclusions in plain language. Test shorter service life, higher renewal prices, different utilisation and site-specific risks such as flooding. Show whether the preferred option changes when these assumptions change.

NTA recommends prioritising best-practice natural turf where it can meet demonstrated demand. Its lower typical capital cost and substantially lower lifecycle cost ratings provide a strong financial case for protecting ratepayers' long-term interests. [1, 2]

5. Recommendations

1. Make natural turf's financial advantage explicit. Quantify the difference in total costs over 30 years and identify how much synthetic renewal contributes to that difference.

2. Include a credible natural turf option. Use the January 2025 NSW best-practice guidelines and independent technical advice to define its design and maintenance needs. [2]

3. Explain departures from NSW benchmarks. If natural turf is estimated to cost as much as synthetic, identify the design, scope or site assumptions driving that outcome.

4. Test the assumptions. Show how replacement timing, prices, utilisation and site risks affect the result. Disclose the basis of quoted service lives.

5. Identify future funding. State who will pay for upkeep and renewal, when funds are needed and how those commitments fit council's asset plans.

Key Takeaways

Natural turf offers a strong long-term cost advantage

NSW guidance rates high-wear best-practice natural turf lifecycle costs well below synthetic turf. [2]

The capital-cost difference can be substantial

The synthetic turf guideline identifies typical natural field construction costs below one-third of synthetic. [1]

Repeated carpet replacement adds up

Natural turf avoids the recurring cost of purchasing, installing and disposing of synthetic carpets.

Demand should be demonstrated

Value depends on useful sporting and community outcomes, not theoretical available hours.

Future ratepayers need a clear picture

Capital grants and today's budgets do not remove tomorrow's financial commitments.

"Best-practice natural turf is an investment in living infrastructure, with a strong long-term financial advantage for the community."

References

1. NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. Synthetic turf sports fields in public open space - Guideline for decision-makers. May 2025. Printed page 21: economic considerations, capital cost, maintenance and repairs, and end-of-life.

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

2. NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Best-practice guidelines for sporting fields. January 2025. Section 4.1, p. 30; Table 11, p. 37: high-wear fields, lifecycle cost and carrying-capacity ratings; section 5.1.1, p. 40.

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

Read the NSW synthetic turf 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/

How to use this fact sheet

Government findings are attributed in the text. The comparison process and questions are NTA recommendations. They provide a framework for assessing proposals; they do not establish a universal cost or saving for either surface.

The eight- and ten-year renewal examples are illustrative assumptions only. A project model should use independently reviewed, site-specific costs and service-life evidence, allow for residual value at the end of the appraisal period, and distinguish cash budgets from discounted economic comparisons.

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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.