SEPTEMBER 1998

# Intensive-use Sports Facilities

# Introduction

This edition of the Planning Bulletin looks at intensive-use sports facilities such as floodlit multi-use games areas (MUGA) and synthetic turf pitches – currently a subject of interest to many schools, clubs and local authorities. The English Sports Council (ESC) has promoted the benefits of such facilities for many years, encouraging their provision on school and other educational sites where dual-use arrangements can make a range of facilities available to the wider community. However, intensive use of a site, even one with a history of sporting activity, can lead to residents and local planning authorities expressing concerns that residential amenities will be adversely affected.

This bulletin examines various types of intensive-use sports facilities and the range of activities they can accommodate, identifies potential areas of concern for local planning authorities, indicates the technical advice available from the ESC, and explores various approaches to the issues identified in development plans. The second part of the bulletin draws on the ESC's Planning Appeals Database to provide examples of recent relevant planning appeal decisions. Advice on the size, orientation and design of multi-use facilities is contained in a number of English Sports Council Guidance Notes (see Further Reading section for details).

# Benefits of intensive-use sports facilities

Intensive-use sports facilities have contributed greatly to sports development in recent years and in the case of hockey, for example, have completely changed the nature of the sport. The last decade has seen huge investment in amenities such as synthetic turf pitches and they are now a basic requirement for most hockey leagues.

Other intensive-use sports facilities, such as MUGAs, can accommodate tennis, netball, football, basketball and training for a number of other sports. In both urban and rural areas these facilities are increasingly looked upon as essential sports development tools, and it is therefore important that any foreseeable planning obstacles are anticipated and catered for at the planning and design stage.

When providing new sports facilities such as MUGAs or floodlit synthetic turf pitches, consideration must also be given to ancillary facilities such as car parking, changing rooms and social accommodation. These issues are particularly relevant to proposals for facilities on school sites that, frequently, are not designed to accommodate the additional pressures imposed by community use.



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## Planning issues at local level

As pressures on existing sports facilities grow and demands for additional facilities increase more schools, sports clubs and local authorities are looking for ways to maximise the use of their sites by installing floodlights and more robust types of sporting surfaces. and improving ancillary facilities such as changing rooms and social areas. Additionally, the advent of the Lottery Sports Fund has enabled sports providers to consider improvements to their facilities that previously might have been out of reach. In the wake of these developments manufacturers of sporting equipment and surfaces have been quick to realise the potential market for their products in the public and voluntary sports sectors. Simultaneously, pressure is building from local residents, environmental pressure groups and local authorities as they seek to restrict what is perceived as unacceptable change to the local environment.

Local planning authorities are, inevitably, caught between these conflicting aspirations and must attempt to balance the legitimate ambitions of sports providers to develop sporting opportunities with the equally legitimate wishes of residents to retain relative levels of peace and quiet. Paragraph 29 of PPG17 (Sport and Recreation) states:

'The provision of ... outdoor synthetic and other surfaces capable of intensive use may help meet the demand for sports facilities while reducing pressure on urban open space. As land supply in urban areas is limited, priority will often need to be given to intensive forms of provision – ie multi-sports provision with indoor and outdoor facilities. Without

sympathetic consideration from local planning authorities to providing such facilities, recreational opportunities for local communities will be restricted.'

Relatively few development plans (local plans, unitary development plans [UDP]) contain specific policies on sports facilities and their impact on surrounding areas, although some have policies on floodlighting and most have general policies that seek to protect the amenities of residential and other areas. Frequently, therefore, decisions on planning applications are made on the basis of local knowledge, non-specific development plan policies and the relevance and strength of any local opposition.

A number of national organisations including the Countryside Commission, the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) and the English Sports Council have produced advice on issues such as floodlighting, and this document summarises the information available to local planning authorities and others when considering proposals for new intensive-use sports facilities. The aim of this bulletin is to stimulate a better informed debate and contribute to a balanced decision making process for development proposals.

## Floodlighting

The floodlighting of outdoor sports facilities is a relatively recent innovation, particularly in relation to small-scale facilities such as tennis courts that traditionally have accommodated only summer and autumn activities. Increased media coverage of sport and local authority and governing body sports development initiatives, however, have led to increased

demands for sports facilities to be available throughout the year. This has resulted in clubs, schools, local authorities and the commercial sector seeking ways to extend the effective use of existing facilities and provide new facilities for intensive use. Floodlighting is essential to maximise the value of these facilities and nowadays it is rare to see a proposal for a new synthetic turf pitch where it is not a specific requirement.

Facilities such as grass tennis courts are often converted to macadam or synthetic grass to extend their availability throughout the year. Floodlighting has taken this process still further by allowing tennis and other activities such as netball and five-aside football to take place throughout an extended day. Parallel with the demand for additional sports facilities is the increasing availability of better quality equipment. In the past floodlights were often poorly designed, erected and maintained, resulting in 'spillage' of light onto adjacent property and consequent annoyance to neighbours. Modern lighting technology enables light to be directed far more effectively, ensuring sufficient illumination of the facility without intrusion into the surrounding area.

The ESC's Floodlighting Guidance Note provides advice on all aspects of the planning, design and maintenance of floodlights for sports facilities. It includes a section on the technical considerations to be taken into account when providing new equipment and is a useful reference for facility providers and local planning authorities when considering proposals for new installations. It also includes a table summarising the minimum maintained lighting requirements for more than 20 sports at low, medium and high levels of competition.

It is vital that floodlighting is designed and installed to minimise light spillage so that visual disturbance to neighbouring properties is kept to the lowest possible level. It should also be remembered that excessive restrictions on the hours when floodlighting is permissible can affect the viability of intensive-use sports facilities, particularly on weekdays when the majority of evening use takes place.

Generally, the ESC supports floodlighting installations that conform to the appropriate standard for the sport(s), will lead to a significant increase in opportunities for sport, and meet relevant planning requirements.



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## Government and other national advice

In addition to ESC guidance, advice is available from a number of national sources on different aspects of intensive-use sports facilities. This includes PPG17 which, as noted above, provides general support for intensive-use sports facilities and suggests that the following factors are taken into account when considering proposals for their provision:

- local environment and amenity
- proximity to public transport
- access for disabled people
- traffic and parking
- relationship to existing open space and grass pitches.

Guidance on floodlighting is restricted to a paragraph that suggests local planning authorities seek adequate information from other sources as a basis for making decisions. The PPG advises that permission might be subject to conditions restricting hours of use or requiring that shielding be used:

'In this way recreation can be encouraged wherever possible and not stifled by lack of information about the effects of a particular development.'

Although Annex 3 of PPG24 (Planning and Noise) contains a section on noise arising from recreational and sporting activities, no mention is made of the type of facilities that are the subject of this bulletin.

In 1990 CIBSE produced a lighting guide for sports facilities containing comprehensive information and

recommendations on lighting levels for many sporting activities at a variety of levels – recreational, club, county, national (see Further Reading section).

In 1997 the Department of the Environment (now Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) and the Countryside Commission produced Lighting in the Countryside: Towards Good Practice. The document contains a section on lighting for sports and leisure activities that summarises existing reference sources and advice and seeks to encourage lighting that reduces pollution in the countryside. Principles for good practice and examples of effective installations are included and there is an extensive bibliography of source material.

## Local planning authority approaches

In addition to guidance on the development of outdoor sports facilities an increasing number of local plans and UDPs include policies and supplementary planning guidance on issues such as floodlighting and noise control. The following examples demonstrate some of the approaches adopted by local planning authorities.



# Wirral UDP – policy RE9 – criteria for floodlighting at sports facilities

'The local planning authority in assessing proposals for the provision of floodlighting at sports facilities will have regard to:

- the visual impact of lights, fences and pylons on the character of the neighbourhood
- the impact of increased use of the site, especially outside normal daylight hours
- the impact of night-time illumination on neighbouring uses, in particular from levels outside the main playing areas
- the impact on residential amenity.

'Planning permission will be subject to conditions related to hours of operation and control of levels of illumination, including the output and intensity of lighting proposed and the horizontal and vertical setting.'

The policy provides a balanced set of criteria to assess the impact of floodlighting, weighing the needs of sport against the reasonable expectations of residents to enjoy the amenities of their properties.

# Poole local plan - policy L8

'Planning permission will be granted for the provision of all-weather floodlit outdoor sports facilities provided that:

- There are no overriding traffic, environmental or amenity objections.
- The development includes an acceptable landscaping scheme.

'A condition limiting the hours of operation of such facilities may be imposed if this is required to secure the environmental acceptability of the scheme.'

The policy seeks to address the problem holistically by considering other environmental problems (such as traffic and noise) rather than concentrating solely on the floodlighting issue.

# South Northamptonshire Council – light pollution, supplementary planning guidance

The guidance was produced to provide additional information on policies in the South Northamptonshire local plan. Light pollution is described as:

' ... the term used by astronomers to describe the brightening of the night sky as a result of upwardly directed light which is then reflected off dust and water droplets in the sky, making it difficult to observe astronomical phenomena.'

The document goes on to identify a number of problems that can occur due to poorly designed lighting:

'The key issues that cause problems for lighting schemes are the levels of light produced, poor direction of light, and excessive hours of use. By establishing the objectives of a lighting scheme and agreeing guidelines a compromise can be reached to reduce the impact of the scheme and, potentially, save the applicant from unnecessary expense on energy.'



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The guidance advises applicants to submit details of a proposed lighting scheme as an element of the planning application, thereby following the advice in PPG17. Additionally, the guidance contains a section outlining the benefits to local communities of floodlit sports pitches and courts. Guidance produced by Northamptonshire County Council is also cited but, unfortunately, the county council guidance pre-empts local decision-making when it states:

'Where housing immediately adjoins a proposed floodlit pitch it is unlikely that planning permission would be granted.'

This guidance can be contradicted by Planning Inspectors during the appeal process, as the section on planning appeal decisions will show.

Macclesfield Borough Council – floodlighting for sporting activities, supplementary planning guidance This guidance was produced in response to the growing number of planning applications seeking approval to floodlight sports facilities. It cites criterion 6 of a policy in the adopted local plan:

'The site should be able to accommodate any necessary lighting without undue intrusion or significant adverse impact upon the immediate locality or wider environment.'

The document refers to English Sports Council guidance, the Department of the Environment–Countryside Commission guidance referred to previously and structure plan policy guidance, before proceeding to a policy statement which provides

criteria to be used in assessing proposals for floodlighting. The following considerations are included:

- impact on landscape
- impact on visual amenities of residents
- safety of transport users
- intensity of use of the site
- concerns of special interest groups such as astronomers.

Although the guidance covers most of the relevant issues, it stops short of providing sufficient information to adequately guide potential applicants and could usefully be extended.

## Planning appeal decisions

The ESC's planning appeals database contains details of 64 cases involving the floodlighting of sports facilities (excluding equestrian- or golf-related examples) between January 1995 and February 1998. Of these 37 related to tennis courts, 19 to synthetic turf pitches and 2 to bowling greens. The planning appeal process resulted in 31 of the cases being allowed, 3 being partially allowed and 30 being dismissed, giving a far higher 'success rate' than the average for all appeals of approximately 33%.

The cases summarised include a cross-section of facilities, geographical areas and outcomes, and demonstrate the type of issues faced by local planning authorities and the Planning Inspectorate in determining cases of this nature.



# Floodlit all-weather outdoor sports pitch Liverpool City Council, February 1996

Appeal ref: T/APP/Z4310/A/95/259403/P8

Decision: Appeal allowed

The proposal involved the construction of a floodlit allweather sports pitch on the site of an existing, smaller pitch within the grounds of a further education college. The college was located in a mainly residential district of Liverpool and the Inspector felt that use of the new facility would be consistent with the UDP's green space policy.

The Inspector noted that floodlighting would facilitate extension of the existing use into the evening and this might be a possible ground for objection. However, he felt that no evidence had been put forward to challenge the noise investigation carried out on behalf of the college and that any noise created by use of the pitch 'would be minimal, and the resultant noise climate would be consistent with the advice in PPG24, Annex 3, paragraph 22.' The Inspector elaborated on the noise issue when he stated:

'This is not to deny that some residents in their gardens and living closest to the pitch would hear some sounds, particularly raised voices, during use of the new facility. However, such sounds from a sports pitch are not incompatible with a residential environment and might reasonably be anticipated by those living close to an educational establishment.'

The Inspector felt that light columns would not be alien features in an urban environment, and that the design of the floodlights would concentrate illumination onto the pitch, thus resulting in minimal light spillage affecting the nearby houses. The Inspector was influenced by two factors when considering the impact of floodlights on the houses:

- Residents would be unlikely to make great use of their gardens during winter evenings when the floodlights would be in use.
- A condition had been agreed whereby the lights would be automatically extinguished at 9.15pm.

In the Inspector's view the main effect of the lighting would be a 'lightening of the sky, a not uncommon phenomenon in an urban area.'

An interesting feature of the case was the issue of the height of the floodlighting columns. The appellants had agreed to the council's suggestion that the columns be reduced in height from 16m to 12m, presumably to reduce any visual intrusion. However, the Inspector noted that the appellants' lighting experts continued to recommended 16m high columns and, in the absence of any contradictory evidence, he concluded that maximum efficiency and minimum offsite spillage would be achieved with 16m columns. This view would certainly be supported by the advice contained in the ESC's guidance note on floodlighting.

Turning to the question of car parking, the Inspector felt that the proposal would not exacerbate existing traffic problems in the area. The pitch would be used primarily by college staff and students thus no additional traffic would be generated. The Inspector did not, however, attach a condition restricting use of the pitch to college personnel.

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The following are points of interest arising from this case:

- 'Expert' evidence on the potential impacts of a new or renovated sporting facility must be sought.
- It is reasonable to expect a certain level of noise to emanate from existing educational-sporting facilities.
- Lighting can and should be installed so that spillage onto adjacent properties is minimised.

# Floodlighting of existing all-weather sports pitch

Cheltenham Borough Council, June 1996

Appeal Ref: T/APP/B1605/A/95/261659/P8
Decision: Appeal dismissed

This case has several parallels with the previous appeal: an existing sports pitch in an urban area, concerns about residential amenity and issues relating to floodlighting. On this occasion the site was an existing all-weather pitch at a college sports field located behind residential properties, several of which were homes for the elderly.

The emerging local plan for the area, which had been subject to a public local inquiry but had not yet been adopted, contained policies dealing with floodlit all-weather pitches and pollution, including light pollution, from proposed developments. Although the site was located in a conservation area, the Inspector felt that the impacts of the proposal were acceptable,



taking into account the established use and character of the college sports field and the proposed position of the floodlights when extended and retracted.

The appellants wished to provide floodlighting to enable college hockey teams to play at home on winter afternoons – currently they were obliged to play matches away from the college. Use would be permitted until 8.30pm on weekdays, 8.00pm on Saturdays and 7.00pm on Sundays. The Inspector noted that four of the floodlighting columns would be 6m from the rear boundaries and 35m from the rear elevations of the adjacent dwellings, whilst the other four columns would be 63m and 91m away respectively. The columns were described as 'telescopic' and were almost 12m high when extended.

The Inspector felt that the main issue was whether or not the floodlights and the consequent extension of the hours of use of the hockey pitch would seriously harm the levels of amenity enjoyed by occupiers of adjacent properties.

The Inspector's decision hinged on the amount of light spillage that would affect the adjacent properties. Even with trees and hedges between the lights and the rear elevations of the houses, he felt the properties would be subject to 'a noticeable increase in the level of illumination when compared with the present levels during the hours of darkness.' Consequently, living conditions would be significantly and adversely affected and the proposal was deemed to be unacceptable.

A secondary concern arising from the lighting issue was increased noise disturbance due to extended use of the hockey pitch. The lights would prolong available playing time by 33 additional hours per week and the Inspector concluded that, as the noise of players, coaches and spectators was audible within the adjacent dwellings, any additional usage would not be appropriate.

This case highlights the following points of interest:

- The decision was significantly influenced by the emerging development plan policies on pollution and all-weather pitches, despite the sports development arguments in favour of the proposal.
- Information on light spillage showed that adjacent properties would be affected by the proposed lights.

Noise disturbance inside the dwellings was of more concern to the Inspector than disturbance to residents making use of their gardens.

# Floodlighting of existing tennis courts Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council, November 1997

Appeal Ref: T/APP/N4205/A/97/279138/P7

Decision: Appeal dismissed

A well-established tennis club in a predominantly residential area, and with three floodlit courts, proposed to floodlight three additional courts. The site was in a conservation area and the Inspector considered the main issues to be the effect of the floodlights on the conservation area and their impact on living conditions in three adjacent dwellings.

On the first issue the Inspector observed that the area was characterised by large houses in extensive gardens set amongst mature trees. Lighting levels were subdued, with the exception of the existing floodlights at the tennis club. The new lights would, he felt 'create a cell of white light which would be clearly visible from nearby points' although it would be filtered by trees in the tennis club's car park. Whilst accepting that the new lights would cause less glare and lightspill than the existing lights, the Inspector considered that the illuminated area would be significantly enlarged and 'would neither preserve nor enhance the character or appearance' of the conservation area thereby conflicting with the aims of national and local planning policies.

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Turning to the second issue, the Inspector noted that the local planning authority had accepted that, subject to the imposition of suitable conditions regarding the installation of spill shields, problems of glare and lightspill outside the illuminated area could be reduced to acceptable levels. However, the new lights would create an intensely lit area that would be clearly visible from the dwellings opposite. Even if a condition was imposed prohibiting lighting beyond 9.00pm or 10.00pm, the Inspector felt that the courts would be lit for unacceptably long periods during winter evenings and would, therefore, have a significantly harmful effect on living conditions in the adjacent dwellings.

Whilst the Inspector was concerned about the impact of the lighting on residential amenities, he did not feel that the proposed development would cause a significant increase in noise or disturbance to nearby residents. He noted that no complaints had been received by the council in respect of use of the courts it was proposed to floodlight, despite their use up to 10.00pm in the summer months 'when nearby residents are more likely to be in their gardens or have their windows open.'

This case brings out the following points:

- In some cases the visibility of new lighting sources can lead to planning concerns, even when direct light spillage is not an issue.
- The impact of floodlights in conservation areas is subject to rigorous scrutiny and can be adjudged differently by individual inspectors.

Floodlit synthetic turf pitch
Bath and North East Somerset Council,
November 1997

Appeal Ref: T/APP/F0114/A/97/284683/P4

Decision: Appeal allowed

This case involved the construction of a floodlit synthetic turf pitch on a school site in the Bath-Bristol green belt. The Inspector first considered the acceptability of the proposal in terms of the development plan for the area, particularly in relation to green belt policy. He found that, as the proposal related to outdoor recreation and maintained the openness of the green belt, the development was appropriate in principle. The council agreed with this point but felt that the development would harm the visual character of the site and the surrounding area and would be detrimental to the visual amenities of the green belt. Additionally, the council took the view that the proposed floodlights would be an unacceptable intrusion into the sky and into the open countryside surrounding the area.

The Inspector noted that 'this is not an area of countryside which is unaffected by synthetic light at night-time.' The school site was illuminated for security reasons, the adjoining sports ground was floodlit and the council had given planning permission for floodlit tennis courts adjacent to the appeal site. Although the new lights would be visible from dwellings some distance away, no evidence was submitted to show that residents' living conditions would be adversely affected. The lights would be prohibited after 6.00pm on Sundays and 9.30pm on other days.

In the Inspector's view neither the level of illumination nor the daytime appearance of the 12m columns and 2.75m chain link fencing would have any significant impact on the visual amenities or character of the area. He felt that considerable benefits would derive to the school and community from the provision of improved facilities and concluded that this factor 'added weight to the balance of considerations in favour of allowing the appeal.'

Key points to emerge from this case are:

- The appropriateness of such facilities in a green belt-countryside location.
- The need to consider the proposed development in relation to existing levels of lighting in the area.
- The Inspector's consideration of the sporting benefits of the proposal after he had determined that the development would not harm the character and visual amenities of the area, taking account of its green belt location.



# Floodlighting of existing and new sports facilities

Derby City Council, January 1998

Appeal Ref: T/APP/C1055/A/97/280754/P5

Decision: Appeal allowed

Several elements were included in this proposal, however only the floodlit sports court is of relevance to this bulletin. The sports court was proposed at a large high school in a residential area of Derby and would be used by pupils and the wider community. The Inspector considered the main issue to be the effect of the proposed development on the living conditions of the occupants of neighbouring residential properties. Local residents were particularly concerned about use of the sports court by members of the public outside school hours.

The new all-weather sports court would replace an existing tennis court area that was used exclusively by school pupils. Consequently the Inspector considered only potential noise and disturbance arising from public use of the new facility outside school hours. Noise data submitted by the council was not considered to be entirely relevant as it related to non-sporting activity by approximately 50 pupils. The Inspector felt that this was not representative of the noise that could be expected to arise from usage by members of the public or clubs. Noting that the sports court would be 18m from the garden boundary of the nearest dwelling and 30m from the dwelling itself, the Inspector felt that any potential disturbance to residents could be ameliorated by conditions requiring the provision of either closeboarded fencing or a brick wall around the court.

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Regarding floodlighting, the Inspector reiterated the point made by his colleagues in other cases that, when the floodlighting was likely to be in use, neighbours would not be using their rear gardens. Conditions controlling the duration of use could ensure that no disturbance was caused to residents within their homes at times when they would normally be sleeping. He also felt that evidence submitted by the appellants had effectively demonstrated that light pollution would not be an issue.

Key points to emerge from this case are:

- Intensive-use sports facilities can be successfully introduced into residential areas if they are appropriately located and designed.
- The Inspector took the commonly expressed view that, as residents were unlikely to use their gardens when floodlights were in use (winter evenings and later summer nights), little disturbance should occur.

Floodlit tennis courts
London Borough of Lambeth, January 1998

Appeal Ref: T/APP/N5660/A/97/281830/P7

Decision: Appeal allowed

This case has a number of issues in common with those detailed above. Additionally, however, the appellants made the point that the club could survive only if improved facilities were in place to attract more members. The council stressed that it wished to see sporting facilities retained in the borough, but that it also had to take account of the effect of new facilities on the amenities of residential neighbours. As in the previous cases, the Inspector felt that the main issue to be considered was the impact on the adjacent residential properties.

The tennis club wished to erect 15 poles, each 6m high, to floodlight four tennis courts on a location surrounded by housing, most of which had direct

views into the site. The council's Environmental Health Officer did not object to the proposals subject to conditions being imposed concerning lighting levels and reduction of glare, and it was noted that the proposals accorded with the guidance for the reduction of light pollution published by the Institution of Lighting Engineers. The Inspector had no doubt that the pool of light created by the floodlights would be visible from the rear windows and gardens of adjoining dwellings, but felt that it would be confined to the playing areas and would not create an unacceptable spillage or glow. A condition requiring the lights to be switched off at 9.00pm on Sundays and 10.00pm on every other day was attached to the permission.

A secondary concern expressed by some residents was the visual impact of the proposed floodlighting columns. However, the Inspector noted that there was already a substantial network of poles and perimeter netting visible from the houses and gardens surrounding the site, and the additional poles would not, therefore, be unacceptable. The Inspector imposed a number of noteworthy conditions to the permission in addition to that controlling the hours of use:

- The floodlights were required to have their beam angle set and retained at below 70 degrees as measured from a vertical plane.
- The lights should be focused on the courts and should not shine towards the neighbouring properties.

- The vertical illuminance attributable to the floodlighting at any window of any adjoining dwelling should not exceed 10 Eu (lux).
- The courts should be operated separately and lit only when in use.

Key points to emerge from this case are:

- The relatively low height of the floodlight columns compared to the other examples cited in this bulletin.
- The Inspector's view that although the pool of light would be visible from surrounding properties, this was not necessarily a reason to withhold permission.
- The high number of conditions imposed by the Inspector.



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# Further reading

CHARTERED INSTITUTION OF BUILDING SERVICES ENGINEERS (1990)

Lighting Guide LG6: The Outdoor Environment CIBSE, ISBN 0 900953 53 5

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT-COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION (1997)

Lighting in the Countryside: Towards Good Practice HMSO, ISBN 0 11 753391 2

The ESC publishes a number of Guidance Notes on related matters. A current list can be obtained from:

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Copies of the appeal decision letters referred to cannot be made available by the English Sports Council or Steven Abbott Associates. Readers wishing to obtain copies are advised to contact the Planning Inspectorate.

# **English Sports Council mission statement**

The English Sports Council aims to lead the development of sport in England by influencing and serving the public, private and voluntary sectors. Our aim is:

- more people involved in sport
- more places to play sport
- more medals through higher standards of performance in sport

© English Sports Council, September 1998
ESC/832/5M/9/98
Designed by Vernon Oakley Strategic Design, London
Printed in England by Keldia Printing Company
Photography by Alan Edwards



Ref no: 832