



**Rt Hon Michael Gove MP**  
Secretary of State

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Murad Qureshi AM  
Chair of the Health and Environment Committee  
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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Murad Qureshi".

12th December 2012

Thank you for your letter of 23 November, about playing pitches in London.

I agree with you and your colleagues that schools must have the space and facilities to offer our children the chance to keep fit and play high quality competitive sport. Sport at school teaches us how to win with grace and lose with equanimity, and should be built deeply into the foundations of a good education.

I cannot agree, however, that a further system of strategic monitoring is the right way to protect our playing fields in London. It strikes me that, at best, this type of system would simply impose an additional layer of bureaucratic process on head teachers, and, at worst, could distance school staff from a sense of their own direct responsibility to protect our playing fields for future generations.

Our current process for protecting playing fields combines a series of strong safeguards against inappropriate disposal with the expectation that those at every stage in the chain will hold themselves accountable to the interests of the children they serve. I am convinced that this system is fit for purpose.

The safeguards we have in place consist of a clear series of guidelines about the circumstances in which the Government will agree to the disposal of school playing fields, and an independent panel to which requests relating to disposal are referred in most instances. Ministers act as an additional safeguard by taking final responsibility for decisions in any cases in which the panel's decision is not unanimous.

This Government will only approve sales if the school has closed, has merged, or proceeds from the sale will be used to provide equal or better sports or education facilities. Disposal can only be agreed if the sports and curricular needs of schools and their neighbouring schools can continue to be met. Any new sports facilities must be sustainable for at least 10 years.

The independent panel comprises representatives from Fields in Trust, the Sport and Recreational Alliance, Learning through Landscapes, the National Association of Head Teachers and the Local Government Association. There is also a non-voting representative from Sport England. The local authority or Academy applying to dispose of land is required to describe their plans and how they will use any income generated by the disposal. The panel considers the application and can ask for more information before deliberating. The panel then votes on the application, applying the rules set by the Government.

It is clear from your letter that your committee cares passionately about the future of sport in our schools, and has a great deal of expertise in this area. I would urge you to consider other ways in which you could act to widen school access to playing fields in London. It strikes me that there is a great deal of work to be done to bridge the gap between schools and private land holders, including private schools, who may be willing to share facilities. I hope you might consider this as a potential area of focus for your future discussions.

Thank you for taking the time to write to me on this important matter. I hope that my reply is helpful to you and your colleagues, and that your work as a committee continues to be fruitful.

Y-s.



MICHAEL GOVE