

Charles Johnston

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17 September 2012

Dear Charles Johnston

Playing fields in London

The London Assembly's Health and Environment Committee meeting on 12 September received an update report on playing fields in London, including information provided by Sport England from its database.

As I am sure you would agree, playing fields and access to them are essential for the health and well-being of Londoners; grass pitches also provide important green spaces within the urban environment. As the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games come to a close and people, especially young people, inspired by them look for opportunities to increase their sporting activity, the continued availability of playing fields and other facilities is necessary to securing a sporting legacy.

Data quality

At its meeting, the Committee was concerned to see that the quality of data over the period 2006-2012 does not allow an assessment of whether or how many playing fields have been lost since the former Environment Committee last investigated this issue in 2006. Anecdotal evidence, specific local issues and media reports give an impression that playing field loss is an ongoing issue, but firm information is vital to determine how far this is actually the case. Effective policy cannot be made without an understanding of the current position and how it is changing.

As Sport England has indicated that the quality of the information in its database was significantly improved in 2010, can you assure the Committee that from that date there is, and will continue to be, a series of data valid for comparisons over time? If not, can you tell the Committee what steps are being taken to ensure that the data available now and in future is of sufficient quality to allow for comparisons over time?

Sites under threat

Obviously of particular concern are the playing fields identified as being at risk. In the report Sport England provided to the Assembly earlier in the year, 25 sites across 11 boroughs were identified in 2010 and 2011 as being 'potentially under threat as the pitches have not been marked out for a period of time or the site... has closed'. There was also an earlier list, not published, of sites identified in

2009 in similar situations. The lists of sites at risk were not subsequently checked with boroughs or site owners, and no update or confirmation of status was immediately available on the 2009 list when our staff enquired.

Please could you tell us what follow-up is done by Sport England on sites identified as being potentially under threat. How can these sites be safeguarded as playing fields? Is any further enquiry or monitoring planned? Do the sites remain in the database and are they counted in the numbers of sites reported?

Pitch numbers

It appears from the numbers in your report to us that the number of pitches marked out on the sites in the database declined by about two per cent between 2010 and 2012, or about three per cent on a pitches-per-site basis – if this were a trend that continued over a number of years it would clearly have a significant cumulative impact on pitch numbers.

Given your work on the quality of the database, do you consider that this change in recorded pitch numbers reflects a change on the ground, or just the database catching up with the real situation? If it is a real change, what is your understanding of the causes, whether this is likely to continue and what further protections should be secured?

Roles

Could you please also clarify for the Committee the respective roles of Sport England, London Boroughs and other bodies including national government in safeguarding playing field provision?

If you are able to respond within three weeks – by Monday 8 October – the Committee would be grateful. If you can copy your response electronically to ian.williamson@london.gov.uk, that would be very helpful.

Yours sincerely.

Murad Qureshi AM

Chair of the Health and Environment Committee