

Leisure & Recreation Committee

Report: Sports Pitch Update

Date: 3rd September 2026

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1. Purpose of Report

To provide Members with an update on the condition of the Council's grass football pitches ahead of the 2026/27 football season, including the impact of the prolonged dry weather, planned maintenance works, replacement equipment and the current position regarding Football Foundation grant funding.

2. Detail

The exceptionally dry and hot conditions experienced during summer 2026 have had a significant impact on the Council's natural grass football pitches.

The prolonged period of limited rainfall has resulted in a number of pitches becoming extremely dry and hard, with grass growth substantially reduced and areas of turf becoming dormant. This has significantly restricted the ability of the Council and its grounds contractor to undertake normal renovation and improvement works.

The position locally reflects the wider national picture. The Met Office has reported that summer 2026 has been characterised by prolonged dry weather and exceptional heat, with significant rainfall deficits developing across much of England and Wales. Although the weather pattern is now becoming more unsettled, the Met Office has advised that rainfall over a relatively short period is unlikely to immediately reverse the deficits that have accumulated during the summer.

The principal concern is the hardness and condition of the playing surface. The Council will therefore continue to assess each pitch individually from a player-safety perspective.

a. FA Drought Guidance

The Football Association has issued specific guidance regarding the use of grass pitches during drought and exceptionally dry conditions.

The guidance confirms that there is no blanket suspension of football just because a pitch is dry or brown. Instead, individual playing surfaces should be assessed with particular attention to:

- excessive surface hardness;
- significant cracking or uneven ground;
- bare or heavily worn areas, particularly goalmouths and centre circles; and
- any other condition which could present an increased risk to players.

The guidance also recommends avoiding unnecessary training or additional use on pitches already showing significant stress and avoiding maintenance operations that could place further stress on dormant turf until adequate moisture is available.

This is consistent with the approach being taken by the Parish Council.

Mannington pitch 4



b. Start of the 2026/27 Season

The current anticipated start of the local adult football season is:

- Swindon Saturday League – Saturday 5 September 2026
- Swindon Sunday Football League – Sunday 6 September 2026

The Council will undertake reasonable basic remedial works in advance of these dates where ground conditions permit, with the aim of making as many pitches as possible available for safe play.

However, the ability of the pitches to recover is now heavily dependent upon meaningful rainfall. Maintenance alone cannot materially soften severely dry ground or restore dormant grass where there is insufficient soil moisture.

Consequently, there is likely to be very limited opportunity for pre-season friendlies or training on Council grass pitches before the formal league programme begins.

Additional use at this stage could further damage already stressed surfaces and reduce their ability to sustain the forthcoming competitive season.

Pitch availability will continue to be assessed operationally, and pitches will not be set up or made available where the Council considers that their condition presents an unacceptable risk.

Where a fixture proceeds, the appointed referee retains the final responsibility for determining whether the field of play is suitable for the match.

c. Weather Forecast

There are some encouraging signs within the current forecast.

The Met Office outlook for 28th August to 6th September indicates a more unsettled and changeable period, with showers or longer spells of rain possible across many parts of the UK. Rainfall totals are currently expected to be above average for the time of year, although there will continue to be drier intervals.

This would be beneficial to the Council's pitches, particularly if rainfall is sustained rather than falling predominantly as short, heavy showers.

Members should nevertheless be aware that the existing moisture deficit is significant. Even where rainfall occurs during the final weeks of August, it may take time before the ground softens sufficiently to allow more substantial maintenance operations or a meaningful recovery of the grass surface.

The position will therefore continue to be monitored closely during the period immediately preceding the first league fixtures.

d. Autumn Pitch Maintenance

Members approved Verti-Quake/aeration works as part of the autumn pitch-maintenance programme.

These works remain planned but will not be undertaken while the ground remains excessively hard and dry. Undertaking deep aeration in the present conditions would be ineffective and could potentially cause additional damage.

The works will therefore be programmed once sufficient rainfall has been received and the soil profile has softened enough for the operation to be effective.

Further remedial and renovation work will then be undertaken as appropriate to individual pitch conditions.

e. Football Equipment

Ahead of the new season, the Council is also replacing football equipment.

This includes:

- purchase of new nets for the portable goals at Southbrook Recreation Ground;
- replacement/additional corner flags; and
- purchase of additional net pegs for use by clubs.

These items will improve the equipment available to clubs and replace equipment which has become worn or is no longer fit for use.

f. Football Foundation Grass Pitch Maintenance Funding

The Council's pitch improvement programme is supported through three Football Foundation grant awards, held by the respective local football leagues.

The funding arrangements form part of a longer-term programme of enhanced pitch maintenance. Under the Council's Service Level Agreement with the leagues, grant support reduces over the life of the programme, with the Council progressively assuming a greater proportion of the cost of maintaining the enhanced standard.

The agreed funding model provides Football Foundation support at:

- Years 1 and 2 – 100%
- Years 3 and 4 – 66%
- Years 5 and 6 – 33%
- Years 7 to 10 – no Football Foundation grant contribution

The Football Foundation contribution is therefore deliberately front-loaded rather than representing a permanent maintenance subsidy.

Grant G108696 – Swindon & District Football League

Site	Penhill Recreation Ground
Original Project Value	£56,736
Football Foundation Grant Award	£37,824
Claimed to date	£29,836
Remaining Grant	£7,988

There is an additional £8,110.00 available to draw down in 2026. Due to be invoiced October 2026.

The grant relates to enhanced grass pitch maintenance works at Penhill Recreation Ground.

The annual Football Foundation contribution is in year 5 & 6, reducing to and anticipated contribution for approximately £3,994 per annum, reflecting the move from the 66% grant-funded phase into the 33% phase of the programme.

Officers will continue to reconcile expenditure and drawdowns with the League to ensure that the maximum eligible grant funding is utilised.

Grant G106332 – Swindon Sunday Football League

Site:	Mannington
Total Project Cost	£84,156
Football Foundation Grant	£53,898
Claimed to date	£43,912
Remaining Grant	£9,986

The Football Foundation portal currently shows the remaining grant as:

- **£4,993 available from 9 January 2027**
- **£4,993 available from 9 January 2028**

Grant G106333 – Swindon Sunday Football League

Site:	Southbrook
Total Project Cost	£33,664
Football Foundation Grant	£21,560
Claimed to date	£17,566
Remaining Grant	£3,994

The portal currently shows the remaining grant as:

- **£1,997 available from 20 February 2028**
- **£1,997 available from 20 February 2029**

The dates displayed against this grant appear unusual when compared with the anticipated programme timetable and will therefore be clarified with the Football Foundation/League before future expenditure is programmed on the assumption that these sums will be available.

Funding Position

The Football Foundation grants are structured to reduce over time, with the Foundation contribution tapering as each project progresses.

The Council has therefore increased its own contribution to pitch enhancement works year on year, with the intention of gradually absorbing a greater proportion of the cost and reducing the financial impact when Football Foundation support ultimately comes to an end.

This approach has allowed enhanced maintenance standards to be sustained while avoiding a sudden increase in Council expenditure at the point the grant funding ceases.

Members should nevertheless note that the remaining Football Foundation contribution will continue to reduce over the next few years. The Council will therefore need to continue planning for the full ongoing cost of enhanced pitch maintenance within future grounds maintenance and sports pitch budgets if the improvements achieved through the programme are to be retained.

3. Recommendation

Members are requested to:

1. **note** the impact of the 2026 drought conditions on the Council's natural grass football pitches;
2. **note** the approach being taken to pitch inspections and the commencement of the 2026/27 football season;
3. **note** that pre-season friendlies and training may need to be restricted while ground conditions remain unsuitable;
4. **note** that the approved Verti-Quake works will be undertaken once sufficient rainfall has softened the ground;
5. **note** the purchase of replacement football nets, corner flags and net pegs; and
6. **note** the current Football Foundation grant position and that clarification will be sought regarding the future claim dates shown against Grant G106333.