# Campaigners warn losing Sport England’s role risks playing fields to housing developments



Campaigners and local community representatives have raised concerns over the government’s proposal to remove Sport England’s statutory consultee role in national planning decisions, warning that thousands of playing fields across England could be lost to housing developments if the move goes ahead.

The government’s National Planning and Infrastructure Bill aims to accelerate the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure by stripping the powers of several statutory consultees, including organisations like the Environment Agency, Natural England, and, potentially, Sport England. The housing and planning minister, Matthew Pennycook, has indicated that the government’s initial intention is to include Sport England alongside the Theatres Trust and the Gardens Trust in this reform.

Alex Welsh, chief executive of the London Playing Fields Foundation, highlighted Sport England’s pivotal role in safeguarding playing fields. Speaking to The Guardian, Welsh emphasised, “When a local group are worried about losing the field at the end of the road – who do they call? They call us and we start by saying, do Sport England know?” He provided data showing that over the past five years, 90% of the 398 concluded planning applications involving playing fields resulted in improved or safeguarded conditions due to Sport England’s involvement. Welsh added, “What we can’t quantify is how many people are put off from blatant building on fields because they are in that role. Who will be doing it when they are gone?”

Sport England itself reported that during the 2022-23 period it protected more than 1,000 playing fields nationally, a demonstration of the organisation’s active engagement in planning matters.

One notable case underscoring the importance of Sport England’s role is the long-running campaign to save Barrow Lanes Fields in Yardley, Birmingham. Fay Goodman, a local resident and charity organiser, described a decade-long struggle to prevent Persimmon Homes from building 180 houses on the community’s playing fields. The campaign, backed by Sport England’s statutory consultee objection, culminated last autumn with a planning inspector ruling against the developer. The inspector determined that Persimmon Homes had failed to provide a like-for-like replacement of the playing fields, a key requirement after Birmingham City Council had initially rejected the development plans.

Goodman told The Guardian, “Sport England were great and helped us show that it would be a disaster for our community.” She emphasised the importance of local playing fields for families in the area, citing issues of poverty, obesity, and asthma. “The developers were trying to say there are alternative spaces four or five miles away – families can’t afford to go four miles,” she said, arguing that off-site alternatives would not meet the community’s needs.

Persimmon Homes expressed disappointment with the planning outcome and stated to The Guardian, “We believe our proposed development could have delivered much-needed new homes to the area, as well as contributing significant sums towards local amenities.”

Responding to concerns about potential playing field losses if Sport England’s role is diminished, a government spokesperson said, “We do not recognise these claims. We remain committed to protecting and extending our playing field capacity, which is why the planning system explicitly protects playing fields. This government is clear that we will reform the system to ensure it is sensible, balanced and does not create unintended delays, so we can build the homes people desperately need and deliver our plan for change.”

Not all members of Parliament agree with the proposed removal of organisations like Sport England from planning protections. Tom Hayes, Labour MP for Bournemouth East, voiced his reservations, arguing for stronger protections of local green spaces. Speaking to The Guardian, Hayes said, “I genuinely want to see the 1.5m homes [pledged in Labour’s manifesto] built but I want to make sure the children who live in those homes can play close to home. We need to keep Sport England, otherwise we are building much-needed homes but without the critical infrastructure that is needed for them – that includes space for play and sport.” He is collaborating with Play England to promote play sufficiency legislation to safeguard local playing spaces.

Sport England, for its part, emphasises that it is not a barrier to development, noting that it responds to over 98% of planning applications within 21 days and objects in only 30% of statutory consultations. Tim Hollingsworth, Sport England’s chief executive, remarked, “History shows us that without effective action taken to protect playing fields, we will see vital facilities lost, particularly often in those areas that are already least well served. With a child obesity crisis and £7.4bn lost to the economy each year to inactivity, it’s essential we get the balance right. Once you lose a playing field or pitch, it’s gone forever.”

The debate surrounding the role of Sport England in planning decisions highlights the challenge of balancing the pressing need for new housing with the protection of community sporting and recreational spaces. The ongoing discussions will be pivotal in determining how England’s playing fields and green spaces are preserved amidst the country’s housing development plans.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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