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| Title of Report: | IFA / Dept for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) Grassroots Facilities Investment Fund 2026-27 |
| Committee Report Submitted To: | Leisure & Development Committee |
| Date of Meeting: | 18 March 2026 |
| For Decision or For Information | For Decision |
| To be discussed In Committee | NO |

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| Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25) | |
| Strategic Theme | Resilient, Healthy & Engaged Communities |
| Outcome | Stable and Cohesive Communities |
| Lead Officer | Head of Funding Unit |

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| Estimated Timescale for Completion | |
| Date to be Completed | 31 March 2027 |

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|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Budgetary Considerations | |
| Cost of Proposal | TBC (60% Funded) |
| Included in Current Year Estimates | N/A |
| Capital/Revenue | Capital |
| Code | |
| Staffing Costs | Funding Officer Time |

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| Legal Considerations | |
| Input of Legal Services Required | No |
| Legal Opinion Obtained | No |

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| Screening Requirements | Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals. | | |
| Section 75 Screening | Screening Completed: | | Date: |
| | EQIA Required and Completed: | | Date: |
| Rural Needs Assessment (RNA) | Screening Completed | | Date: |
| | RNA Required and Completed: | | Date: |
| Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) | Screening Completed: | | Date: |
| | DPIA Required and Completed: | | Date: |

1.0 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide members with information on a funding opportunity from the Irish Football Association and to recommend applying to the fund to install a new, accessible artificial grass pitch at Parker Avenue, Portrush.

2.0 Background

2.1 Officers received notification on 19 February 2026 that the Irish Football Association/ Department for Culture, Media & Sport Grassroots Facilities Investment Fund had opened for applications.

2.2 Grants under the Fund are to support grassroots activities in sport. Grassroots activities in sport are foundational, local-level, community-driven, and primarily recreational.

2.3 The Fund aims to allow grassroots football clubs, local authorities, schools and football-focused Sports Community / Charitable organisations in Northern Ireland (NI) to improve and refurbish facilities so that grassroots football clubs and communities have a high-quality pitch to play on, thereby helping to create a better grassroots football infrastructure foundation.

2.4 The following list outlines the priority objectives of the Fund. Projects that align with multiple objectives will score more highly during assessment.:

- Improves the capital infrastructure to support the delivery of grassroots football activities.
- Delivers a sustained increase in participation in sport and physical activity, improving mental and physical health of participants.
- Increases the number of multi-sport facilities in Northern Ireland to deliver a sustained increase in participation in non-football sports.
- Reduces the postcode lottery for quality facilities by directing investment to disadvantaged or areas of deprivation and deliver a sustained increase in participation and physical inactivity in these areas.
- Delivers improved access to sport facilities for women and girls to deliver a sustained increase in participation.
- Delivers improved access for under-represented groups to deliver a sustained increase in participation.
- Delivers 'value for money' investment in facilities by securing partner match funding.

Additional information is available at **Annex A**.

2.5 Funding will support and be directed towards:

- The installation of a new, accessible natural grass pitch or replacement/ enhancement of an existing, accessible natural grass pitch.
- The installation of a new, accessible artificial grass pitch (AGPs) or replacement of an existing, accessible artificial grass pitch.
- The installation of a new, accessible small-sided Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) that is suitable to host small-sided association football activities.

The application portal opened on Wednesday 18 February 2026 and will close at 12 noon on Wednesday 18 March 2026.

3.0 Eligibility

- 3.1 To be eligible, projects must be primarily intended to support grassroots football. For the purposes of the fund, Grassroots Football is all non-professional and non-elite/academy football, serving as the foundation of the game by promoting participation for everyone in Northern Ireland, regardless of age, gender, ability or background.
- 3.2 Where the applicant is not a football club, they must be partnered with a football club that must be named in the application and the partnership evidenced through a Memorandum of Understanding or other written confirmation showing how the club will use the pitch/facility for grassroots football.
- 3.3 The partner club is required to meet the following accreditation or licensing requirements:
- The club must be accredited under the Irish FA's People and Clubs accreditation programme, or
 - The club must have commenced the accreditation process and be fully accredited before any final grant claim is processed, or
 - Be a Northern Ireland Football League club that has been awarded a club licence for the

4.0 Levels of Grant Award

- 4.1 A total capital funding pot of £2.7 million is available for the financial year 2026/27. The minimum award per project is £100,000 with a maximum award of up to £500,000.
- 4.2 Local Authorities, Schools, Colleges and Universities in Northern Ireland must provide at least 40% match funding. For all other applicants there is a minimum 10% match funding expectation.
- 4.3 This is a competitive fund. Only one application is allowed per Council area and the IFA have advised that they intend to support only **2** Local Authority projects.

5.0 Criteria for Assessment

- 5.1 Priority will be given to those projects that:
- Demonstrate they can deliver the greatest impact against the programme and funding objectives over a sustained period.
 - Meet the funds technical requirements.
 - Evidence need and demand.
 - Have the capacity to commence quickly and complete the proposed pitch project by 31st March 2027.
 - Complement government investment priorities and sports development strategies.

6.0 Project Selection

- 6.1 In selecting a project to bring forward to this fund, Officers met and discussed the criteria for application against projects already on Council's capital projects list. The following considerations were applied:
- Ability to develop a grant application and submit an eligible project along with all requested supporting documentation including full design/plans and costings in advance of 18 March 2026 submission deadline.
 - Shovel ready projects / state of readiness.

- Ability to complete all works before 31 March 2027.

6.2 Council previously submitted an application to this fund for a project at Parker Avenue in 2023. The application was unsuccessful due to the fund being oversubscribed. Officers are confident that the application along with updated design and financials can be resurrected for completion and submission before the 18 March 2026 deadline. Based on application ready information, project design, costings and a near state of readiness aligned to the funder's requirements, the Parker Avenue project was selected for application to the IFA grassroots facilities investment Fund.

7.0 **Timeline**

7.1 The timeline for the 26-27 Irish FA/ DCMS Grassroots Facilities Investment Fund is as follows:

| Action | Date |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Fund open for applications | Wednesday 18 February 2026 |
| Fund close for applications | 12noon on Wednesday 18 March 2026 |
| Application appraisal / assessment period | April / May 2026 |
| Letters of Offer issued | May 2026 |
| Projects completed | 31 March 2027 |

8.0 **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Leisure & Development Committee recommends to full Council:

- Approval to submit an application to the IFA Grassroots Community Facilities Fund to replace the grass pitch at Parker Avenue, Portrush with a new accessible artificial grass pitch.

| Objective | Key Performance Indicator |
|--|---|
| Grassroots Infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the number of quality grassroots pitches throughout Northern Ireland. |
| Participation in Grassroots Sport | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in participation in sports and physical activity within 12 months. • Increase in participation sustained or further increased over 4 years. |
| Multi-sport | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 flagship projects which guarantee a minimum 30% share of priority slots for non-football use. • 40% of investment will fund projects which have a regular and sustained multi-sport offer of more than 5 hours a week. • Increase in participation sustained or further increased over 4 years. |
| Deprivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% of investment in the top 30% most deprived areas, based on the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017 (NIMDM2017) and Local Authority inactivity rankings. |
| Women and Girls | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30% of priority usage hours for women and girls within 12 months. • 50% of priority usage hours for women and girls by year 4. |
| Under-represented groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A minimum of one hour of access to the pitch per week for under-represented groups, defined as those who face greater barriers to participation, access, or opportunity. |
| Value For Money | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average of 35% of match funded projects costs. |