

Artificial Surfaces – A Consultation paper



For submission to the SPFL board before 25th March 2024

On behalf of member clubs – Raith Rovers, Airdrieonians, Falkirk, Hamilton, Cove Rangers, and Queen of the South.

Executive summary

1. Asking the wrong question will inevitably lead to the wrong answer. A decision to ban artificial surfaces from the Premiership could reduce pitch standards and damage the whole game in the long-term – exactly the opposite of what we should be trying to achieve.
2. Banning artificial surfaces would have serious implications in terms of sporting integrity, with clubs denied promotion due to being unable to meet criteria, after a successful league or play-off final win.
3. The costs associated with the installation of a grass pitch are projected to be on average £1.2m per club, with a further £1m lost on infrastructure and development.
4. The average impact on a club's annual operating cost is projected to be £310k p.a. per club, an average of 22% of a club's turnover based on the six member clubs.
5. When both the mandatory capital expenditure and increased operating costs are combined, the promoted club with a projected turnover of £3-4m has its player budget hamstrung due to the enforced expenditure of up to 50% of predicted turnover. This would make it almost impossible to compete, with relegation and near certainty. A further £1 million would need to be spent, if the club was subsequently relegated, to revert to artificial, to reestablish the original business model.
6. A ban would also have a devastating effect on the women's game, community, and academy programmes, with an average of 1,575 hours of lost pitch time annually, negatively affecting up to 2,500 players every week per club. This impact would be localised and, given the clubs most immediately affected, would be focussed on urban areas i.e. those in greatest need of community programmes.
7. The decision would have a very damaging impact on many member clubs with no evidence that it would improve the standard of the surfaces within the league, indeed it could reduce standards.

Sporting Integrity

Is this decision in the best interests of the game and all member clubs?

Creating a situation where the champion club or play-off winner of the Championship is denied the opportunity to be promoted is anti-competitive and not in the best interests of the Scottish game.

Comparisons can be drawn with the decision made by 10 clubs in 1994 to force clubs to develop 10,000-seater stadia, a poorly thought-out, poorly researched decision, which had serious and long-lasting ramifications for the game. Many clubs suffered because of this decision, with successful clubs refused entry to the league and others going into administration in the pursuit of the dream to reach the SPL. The decision was correctly changed in 2004, however the lasting impact of this decision can still be seen and felt today.

Clubs with artificial surfaces have invested in the infrastructure, up to £1m, at a time when artificial surfaces have been permitted within the SPFL Premiership. A retrospective decision would be grossly unfair, placing clubs at a huge disadvantage both financially and competitively. The current proposals pay no consideration to the damage that would be inflicted on member clubs, which would lead to:

1. Clubs being forced to commit to an investment in the region of £1.2m-1.4m, in advance of a potential promotion, with no guarantee of achieving promotion.
2. Clubs being forced to fundamentally change their business model, which would negatively affect a club's operating model by an average of £310k per annum, thus creating a liability in the region of £1.5m-1.7m in year 1 for a newly promoted club.
3. Clubs potentially being liable for paying back grant monies received to install pitches, then removing them before the end of the grant lifespan, thus creating a greater financial liability. As well as potentially wasting public funds this could negatively impact the future support of key stakeholders such as the Scottish and UK governments.
4. Clubs could potentially find themselves paying off loans received to install pitches - normally spread over the lifespan of an artificial pitch - while simultaneously having to fund a new pitch, thus creating an even greater financial liability.
5. Clubs would require 10-12 weeks to complete the transition from an artificial pitch to a grass pitch. For the play-off winner, it is unlikely the club would be able to host a game at home until mid to late August, thus requiring a club to ground share and further increasing operating costs and reducing the club's ability to compete.

Clubs should be rewarded for gaining promotion to the Scottish Premiership, the current proposals would put a club at a considerable disadvantage, creating an anti-competitive environment. The huge liability and risk associated with transitioning from an artificial surface to grass make it both entirely feasible and very likely, that faced with the scenario above, the champion club or play-off winner would be unable to meet the criteria required for the Premiership and therefore be denied promotion.

It is of course vital that we all continually strive to improve the game, yet we believe that we are fundamentally asking the wrong question; an act which will invariably lead to the wrong answer. Instead of "should we have grass or artificial pitches?" the appropriate question should be "how do we ensure that matches are played on the highest quality pitches possible?". Given the climate in Scotland, and the impact of winter weather on grass, we believe that high-quality artificial pitches are at least part of the answer to this question, and in some cases a better answer than grass pitches.

If we consider what excellence looks like, the very best quality grass pitches are likely to be found at the top clubs in Europe, where annual pitch maintenance budgets can run well in excess of £1 million per annum. Having the very best quality grass pitches is therefore beyond the reach of all clubs in Scotland, with the possible exception of two. In any season, at least 85% of all Scottish Premiership games will therefore be played on grass pitches which fall short of the highest possible quality for football, such as those we'd expect to see in UEFA competitions. By contrast the very best UEFA-approved artificial surfaces are within the financial reach of many clubs in Scotland and should be achievable by all Premiership and even Championship clubs.

Our shared goal should therefore be ensure the highest-quality playing surfaces possible in the Premiership, but by asking the wrong question the erroneous conclusion - to ban artificial surfaces – would preclude the possibility of matches being played on artificial surfaces of a standard accepted in the Champions League, whilst ensuring that most matches are played on grass surfaces, the large majority of which will fall well short of Champions league standard. This is entirely illogical and self-defeating.

In our opinion it is obvious that the very best artificial surfaces are superior to sub-standard or even average quality grass pitches, across every aspect of football from the player experience to the televisual aesthetic. However, we are not aware of any research which has been conducted to assess this. Ideally such research would provide comparative measures between the best artificial surfaces and variety of grass pitches standards. These measures would include a quantitative assessment of how pitches “play” in a technical sense (bounce, roll etc) as well as qualitative feedback on the player, fan, and TV-viewer experience.

In the absence of any such data, and without considering the sub-optimisation of grass pitches in Scotland (because of financial constraints and weather), any decision taken to prioritise such pitches above the best artificial surfaces, in terms of quality, could only be based on personal preference or prejudice. Neither are robust bases upon which to make such a critical decision.

We believe the aim of the SPFL should be to ensure that all matches are always played on the best possible surfaces, whether those pitches are grass or artificial. We believe that by asking the wrong question and acting in haste, there is a real risk that we will arrive at the wrong answer; an answer which will have a long-lasting and detrimental impact on the Scottish game, and repeat the 10-000-seater stadia mistake, rather than learning from it.

We would therefore implore the Premiership clubs to slow down and take the time to fully consider this matter. In doing so they should consider the following questions.

- How do we ensure that all clubs in the Premiership have a consistently high-quality playing surface?
- If a grass surface is optimum for some, how do we define this and what are the associated costs to deliver this and what measures that can be put in place to achieve this?
- Given the climate and economic landscape in Scottish football, is it viable and realistic for all Premiership clubs to choose grass over artificial?
- What can we learn from UEFA and FIFA where artificial surfaces are permitted at the highest level of club and international competition?
- What can we learn from other countries with a similar climate and with leagues that operate within similar economic constraints?
- What research exists to support this decision or what research can be carried out to ensure the correct decisions is reached?

Evidence suggests (both historically and currently) that clubs within the Scottish Premiership are unable to achieve a consistently high standard of grass pitch. A high-quality artificial surface can help to deliver a consistently high product both in performance and aesthetically.

A proposal of this magnitude must consider all member clubs and be backed up with data and research as part of a comprehensive consultation process. Striving to improve the game should not come at the cost of self-harm to the very game we are all seeking to improve.

Financial Ramifications

Construction and installation

Cost of construction of a new natural grass pitch, allowing for the removal of the existing artificial grass pitch and transition to grass.

£1.4m

Based on a full construction, with new drainage, pitch profile, undersoil pitch heating, irrigation system and full hybrid stitched system.

£1.2m

Based on a partial construction with some elements that can be reused, undersoil pitch heating, irrigation and full hybrid stitched.

£1.05m

Based on a fibre-reinforced rootzone construction, undersoil pitch heating and irrigation.

£0.95m

Based on a partial construction with some elements that can be reused, irrigation and full hybrid stitched with no undersoil heating.

£0.80m

Based on a fibre-reinforced rootzone construction with irrigation but no undersoil heating.

Business model

The annual impact on each club due to the increased maintenance, training ground hires and reduced operating income.

Cost area	Average cost across the 6 clubs per annum	Description
Loss of revenue from hires	£100k	Total loss for all associated hires
Cost to hire a training ground. (first team)	£60k	Varies location to location. Availability would also be an issue for some.
Cost to hire a training ground. (foundation and/or academy)	£40k	Varies location to location. Availability would also be an issue for some.
Grass pitch maintenance. Weekly maintenance schedule	£50k	Indicative figure based on consultation work.
Grass pitch maintenance. Annual maintenance schedule	£30k	Indicative figure based on consultation work.

Staffing cost	£30k	Estimated cost of FTE grounds person.
TOTAL	<u>£310k*</u>	Average cost to the clubs

*Represents an average of 22% of the club's turnover.

Impact on the Wider Game

It is also important to consider the impact on the wider game, including the women's game, club academies and grassroots and community football. It is estimated that the removal of an artificial surface would result in the loss of 1,575 hours of lost pitch time annually, the majority of which is grassroots participation. This would negatively affect up to 2,500 players weekly within any one club based on the average usage and participation numbers of the clubs involved.

At a time when our game is striving to achieve equality across the men's and women's game, this decision would raise serious questions and challenges. Any decision regarding artificial surfaces should be made with full consideration given to the women's game as well as the men's. A unilateral decision to ban artificial surfaces in the men's Premiership, whilst continuing to allow them within the women's Premiership, calls into question how serious our game is at achieving and promoting equality. There is also a potentially negative PR fall out due to this inequality at a time when marketing the game has never been more important due to the challenging landscape within the broadcast and sponsorship industries.

The Scottish FA is currently working on a transition project aimed at supporting the development of young players, to increase and improve the quality of the game at the highest level, which should in turn benefit our national teams and deliver more money into the game. This project has highlighted some very concerning statistics about the development and progression of young Scottish players into the professional game. Councils across the country are shutting down and restricting access to facilities, therefore in turn, reducing the opportunity for players to train and play which will, in time, have a negative effect on the grassroots and academy game. Banning artificial surfaces will not only further reduce the number of hours available to a community, but it may also lead to the closure of club academies and community programmes, the grave impact of this cannot be underestimated.

Any decision on artificial surfaces must consider its impact on the wider game. Every club within the SPFL and Scottish FA pyramid has a role to play in nurturing and developing the next generation of players, supporters and officials for the long-term health and success of our national game.

This is evidenced within the Scottish FA publication *'Environmental Sustainability in Scottish Football'* which actively promotes the use of artificial surfaces for both environmental considerations and for the benefit of the national game.

<https://www.scottishfa.co.uk/news/scottish-football-outlines-sustainability-commitment-as-cop26-climate-summit-takes-place-in-glasgow/>

Is it truly in the best interests of the game to reduce playing opportunities, restrict access to community hubs and create an inequality between the men's and women's game?

Our recommendations

All 6 clubs involved within this consultation wish to lend support towards improving the quality of the surfaces within our game. The recommendations below aim to,

- ✓ Offer an alternative proposal to the current one, which will significantly improve the quality, consistency, and perception of artificial surfaces within the SPFL, **and**
- ✓ Achieve this without creating a serious sporting integrity issue, **and**
- ✓ Will not inflict self-harm on member clubs, **and**
- ✓ Will not negatively impact the wider game.

List of recommendations

1. An artificial surface cannot be older than 4 years for use within the Scottish Premiership.
2. Only approved surfaces (FIFA PRO or similar) are permitted for use within the Scottish Premiership. This ensures the quality of the pitch is equal to those permitted by UEFA within the Champions League and other European competitions*
3. Only approved contractors are permitted to install an artificial surface for use within the Scottish Premiership to ensure the consistency and quality of the install. This should include planning, build, design specifications and installation.
4. Every surface will be held to the highest standard through the FIFA Pitch Pro Advanced (or similar) testing programme. This ensures the quality of the pitch is equal to those permitted by UEFA within the Champions League and other European competitions*
5. Every pitch must confirm to an approved pitch maintenance plan which will include 4 spot tests per year and 2 deep cleans per season.
6. Every surface must have an approved irrigation system.
7. Every surface must use the highest standard of infill (currently green rubber, however this will change in the future due to environmental concerns) to improve appearance.
8. Any club with an artificial surface must demonstrate an approved method of frost/snow protection (potentially an inflatable bubble or compliant covers).

The above would ensure artificial surfaces within Scotland are held to the very highest standard, which would also comply with UEFA guidelines for permitted use within European competitions. Clubs in Scotland can achieve a quality of pitch equal to those used at the highest level of the game in Europe. This is evidenced in the links below.

Young Boys vs Manchester City

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euo2G90bBBU&feature=youtu.be>

BK Hacken vs Aberdeen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNZOjn1kQMU>

Airdrieonians vs Heart of Midlothian

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/av/football/68270241>

Falkirk vs Dundee United

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pw_FNVgt-n0&feature=youtu.be

The total investment in infrastructure, including an elite artificial surface, is estimated to be circa £1m with a further £350-400k investment required every 4 years to replace the surface. The total investment in an artificial pitch of this quality, year on year, is therefore estimated to be circa £100k, which is in line with the estimated annual spend on a grass pitch, ensuring clubs within the Premiership are investing a similar amount of money into their pitches.

***UEFA article 31 Artificial turf**

31.01

With the exception of the final, which must be played on natural turf, matches in the competition may be played on artificial turf in accordance with the UEFA Stadium Infrastructure Regulations and provided that such artificial turf is certified as FIFA Quality Pro

31.02

The owner of the artificial turf and the home club are fully responsible for meeting the above requirements, in particular those related to:

- a. maintenance work and ongoing improvement measures; and***
- b. safety and environmental measures as set out in the FIFA Quality Programme for Football Turf – Handbook of Requirements and the FIFA Quality Programme for Football Turf – Handbook of Test Methods.***

Timeframe and schedule

The recommendation would be for existing surfaces to have a period of grace until the beginning of season 2026-27. All artificial surfaces would be required to meet the criteria listed above by the start of season 2026-27.

Consultation and research

To ensure the correct decision is reached for the good of the game, the group recommends an evidence-based and data led approach. The group recommends a period of consultation and research to be carried out, to achieve this.

The group consists of 3 clubs with an artificial surface less than 4 years old and 3 clubs with an artificial surface greater than 4 years old. It is recommended that the research includes performance-based testing on the group's current pitches, using the 2 samples, (surfaces less than 4 years old vs surfaces greater than 4 years old) to ensure the recommendations above are supported with data and evidence.

It is also recommended that this consultation and research time is used to fully understand and analyse the performance of a grass pitch versus an artificial surface and what criteria can be implemented in relation to grass pitches, to ensure the highest possible standard of pitch is delivered within the Scottish Premiership.