

ALL WEATHER PITCH HEALTH RISKS



The English Football League has outlawed 3G pitches but there are plans to build thousands more. Photo: Daniel Lewis/Alamy. Below: Tony Gavin

PM plans to build 2,000 artificial pitches

Campaigners say they pose risks to players

Parents and teachers have spoken out about the health and environmental risks of artificial sports pitches after Boris Johnson announced plans to build thousands of them for England's bid to host football's 2030 World Cup.

Artificial turf allows games to go ahead that would otherwise be postponed. But so-called 3G pitches are often made from used car tyres and contain chemicals such as lead, mercury and benzene. In the Netherlands more than 100 clubs have banned their use for youth games after analysis of 60 showed carcinogen levels to be up to six times higher than would be allowed for consumer products.

There are currently 4,853 3G fields across the UK, with the government planning to build 2,000 more. But the English Football League (EFL) has outlawed artificial pitches.

Pitch contact

In 2013, Lewis Maguire, 13, from Darlington was half way through a 12-week trial as a goalkeeper for Leeds United when he was forced to quit after he became unwell. He was found to have developed Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a form of blood cancer. His father, Nigel, quit as chief executive of NHS Cumbria to look after Lewis, who died in 2018.

In 2016, Nigel Maguire wrote to sports minister Tracey Crouch highlighting the developments in the Netherlands as well as research by former US international goalkeeper Amy Griffin. Of 150 footballers who had played regularly on 3G fields and had cancer, Griffin discovered that more

than 100 were goalkeepers – a position that means the player will be in contact with the pitch surface more than other players.

Acting sports minister David Evennett replied that football authorities "adhere to the latest independent evidence, which indicates that 3G pitches ... are safe".

Maguire remains unconvinced. He wants to see a moratorium on the construction of any 3G pitches, the replacement of rubber with inert materials such as cork and coconut fibres and to ensure that young goalkeepers no longer practice on such fields.

He called on the Football Association to ensure coaches make players shower after playing or training on 3G pitches, to remove rubber crumb from their bodies and equipment.

Others point out that 3G pitches only last around 10 years. Viv Mitchell, whose

local council built a 3G pitch close to her home in Northampton, pointed out that companies in the Netherlands had refitted pitches in Africa rather than disposing of them responsibly at the end of their life. She calculated that the pitch close to her contained 20,000 tyres.

"This is going to be a lot of plastic waste and rubber crumb going to landfill every 10 years," she said. "It is industrial dumping as these



pitches won't last any length of time before they aren't fit to play any sports on."

In reply to *Big Issue North's* detailed list of questions, a spokesperson for Defra, the government department responsible for sports fields, said waste tyres are classified as "absolute non-hazardous" by the EU.

Call for urgent review

The spokesperson also pointed to a 2017 European Chemicals Agency evaluation that concluded there is a very low level of concern from exposure to substances found in recycled rubber granules used in sports pitches, and that there is "no reason to advise people against playing sports on synthetic turf containing recycled rubber granules as infill material".

The spokesperson added: "We are committed to protecting the environment and wildlife including through the regime which regulates chemicals and restricts the use of harmful substances in products.

"The European Chemicals Agency concluded there is a very low level of concern from exposure to substances found in recycled rubber granules used in sports pitches. A further restriction is being considered that would further lower the concentration limits."

According to an FA spokesperson: "Hygiene guidance is being promoted on social media and shared with the county FAs."

Tony Gavin, former head of Laurence Jackson School, a specialist sports school in Guisborough, North Yorkshire, said: "There should be an urgent FA review as part of a full government enquiry with legal powers to investigate the whole process, from procurement to construction, including materials used.

"The priority must be the health, safety and wellbeing of young people. Any ingredients which pose a risk must be identified, highlighted, discontinued and removed immediately."

MARK METCALF



Lizards are released each September and this year eggs have been found

Sand lizards return to the Fylde Coast

Rare reptile is bred in captivity and released

The UK's rarest lizard species has been making itself at home on the Fylde coast thanks to conservation efforts, with September a crucial month in their lives.

Breeding sand lizards in captivity and releasing them onto the dunes is part of a long-term attempt to restore the species.

In the UK sand lizards only live on two rare habitats – sand dunes and lowland dry heath. Due to loss of habitats, the species has disappeared in many parts of the country, including in Cheshire.

Wider conservation

Native populations now only remain in Merseyside, Surrey and Dorset, although even there losses of up to 97 per cent have occurred.

The lizards are hatched in a breeding centre in Sefton, where outdoor enclosures mimic the natural dune

environment. The captive bred juveniles are released on to the Fylde sand dunes in early September each year to allow them to gradually get used to their new home, before they hibernate in October.

The scheme is part of a wider conservation programme, Fylde Sand Dunes Project, bringing together Lancashire Wildlife Trust, Fylde and Blackpool Council, the Environment Agency, Amphibian & Reptile Conservation, Fylde and North Merseyside Amphibian Groups and Natural England. "Over the last three years the team have released over 300 sand lizards on to the Fylde dunes," said area conservation ranger Andrew Mills. "It has been a great project to be involved in and we have already had a success story with hatched eggs found in September 2019 proving that the conditions here can support a healthy population."

ANTONIA CHARLESWORTH

NEWS IN BRIEF

WOMEN'S CHARITY SUCCESS

A Liverpool charity tackling forced marriage, FGM and "honour"-based abuse had a 1,300 per cent increase in its caseload and a 150 per cent increase in self-referrals following a round of Lottery funding. Savera UK has revealed the outcomes of a three-year project to develop one-to-one support for victims, engage young people in school and raise community awareness.

FREE ELECTRIC BIKES

Commuters in Leeds can borrow an electric bike free of charge for up to two weeks as part of a council initiative to promote sustainable travel. The scheme will be based at the new pop-up bike hub at Kirkgate Market where bike storage is also being offered. Visit in person or find out more at leeds.gov.uk/ebiketrial.

NO-DEAL FRUIT AND VEG

Supermarket food prices will rise in the event of a no-deal Brexit, Morrison's chief executive has warned. David Potts from the Bradford-based supermarket called for the government to negotiate a deal that includes no inflation-driving tariffs between the UK and Europe. He added that avoiding inflation has become more vital as the country faces a recession.

CONTRACEPTION ACCESS

Calls to access the contraceptive pill over the counter have increased following a report finding that many women are struggling to get contraception as a result of underfunding and cuts to services. An all-party parliamentary group found long waiting times for GP training and a lack of GP training in offering long-term contraceptives is leaving women at risk of unplanned pregnancy.

Got an event, campaign or story from your area? Email news@bigissueenorth.co.uk