

Report on	Mid Ulster Sports Arena – Capital Project
Date of Meeting	14 th March 2024
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	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	This report seeks to provide members with an update on the European Commissions ruling on 25th September 2023, in relation to the long-term control and management of the use of microplastics and to seek Members approval for the new MUSA pitch to be developed based on current internationally recognised standards to include modern containment methods.
2.0	Background
2.1	In 2017 the European Commission asked the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) to research the impact of intentionally added microplastics in a range of industries and applications.
2.2	In 2019, ECHA published a report which included a recommendation of a broad restriction on the use of intentionally added microplastics with the aim of reducing environmental pollution caused by microplastics.
2.3	In 2022, the European Commission released a statement which recommended the introduction of a ban on the future sale of 'intentionally added microplastics' onto the European market.
2.4	On 25th September 2023, the European Commission took a major step to protect the environment by adopting measures that restrict microplastics intentionally added to products under the EU chemical legislation REACH.
2.5	The new rules will prohibit the sale of microplastics, and of products to which microplastics have been added. The new rules imply a ban on the sale of all 'intentionally added microplastics' following an eight-year transition period. The rules were adopted on 25th September 2023, with the transition period ending October 2031.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	The rules under the EU chemical legislation REACH are now in place, which means the 8-year transition period has already begun. The new rules do not prevent the continued use of micro-plastic materials for synthetic surfaces, nor does it prevent the construction of new synthetic surfaces with rubber crumb infill before 2031.
3.2	At the end of the transition period (2031), it will not be possible to source rubber infills within the European Union, which will make maintenance of synthetic playing surfaces a significant challenge.

3.3	When the eight-year transition period has ended, only natural and fully biodegradable infill materials will be permitted for use in synthetic surfaces. Consequently, it is expected that synthetic pitch systems will change significantly in the coming years and costs of organic materials are likely to fluctuate in the short term, as commercial organisations compete for a share of the market.
3.4	Systems have already been developed using organic infill materials, including granulated cork, coconut fibre, olive stone husks, bark, sand, and corn kernels. These systems are currently being piloted across Europe, with the first organic infill pitch system on the island of Ireland expected to be installed in 2023/2024.
3.5	It is important to note that organic infill materials have yet to prove their durability and suitability for all UK/Irish weather conditions. Lifecycle costs are currently unclear, as is the ability to deliver the required performance standards over a longer period. It is only when these systems have been installed, and in use for longer periods, can advantages and disadvantages of these alternatives be analysed.
3.6	Organisations who own or operate existing synthetic surfaces with rubber infill will need to plan carefully for the end of lifecycle or maintenance ‘top-up’, should either of those dates fall outside of the transition period.
3.7	After the eight-year transition, there is no ban on the use of rubber infill, but it will be impossible to source rubber infill from within the EU member states. In the short to medium term, organisations with aspirations of developing new 3rd Generation pitches, must carefully consider the likely challenges that will arise after the transition period, as this is likely to come before the 10–12-year lifecycle of a new 3rd Generation surface.
3.8	Organisations developing new surfaces may wish to consider the use of organic infills, and those with existing surfaces should consider the adoption of containment measures, as this is a responsible approach to prevent the migration of microplastics. Studies from around Europe show containment measures can reduce infill loss by 98%.
3.9	MUDC currently own and maintain 14 x 3G surfaces across the Councils estate. Council may be required to maintain a supply of rubber crumb infill for the continued use of those facilities until they reach the end of their natural lifespan (typically 10 years, depending on usage and maintenance).
3.10	As part of the MUSA Multi Facility Fund programme, the project to date has been based on the delivery of a 3G synthetic pitch with rubber crumb infill. The project team are at a critical stage of design. All future decisions will be based on achieving the most economically and environmentally sustainable design, ensuring the pitch can be used for the full duration of its lifecycle.
3.11	Given the lack of research and evidence in relation to performance, durability, testing/accreditation, the ICT team have instructed Council that current 3G crumb infill design offers the optimum proposal technique.
3.12	The Council may therefore have to maintain a supply of rubber crumb infill in advance of 2031 which would be required as a top up for the remaining lifespan of the pitch (potentially 3 years). The Council will have a greater understanding of the level of supply that will be required after the pitch has been in use for the first 3 years.

3.13	In order to try to keep infill to a minimum, the Council will ensure that routine professional maintenance and containment barrier solutions are included within the specification for the appointment of contractors for all new 3G Pitch instalments.
3.14	Sport NI have recently prepared a position paper and the Irish Football Association have released a statement relating to this matter – both enclosed within the appendix.
3.15	In context of the current MUSA capital project, as this is currently a live project and subject to substantial external timebound funding (March 2025), Members approval is sought to develop 3G facilities based on current internationally recognised standards inclusive of rubber crumb infill utilising modern containment methods. These developments will be subject to continued planning consultations and guidance as part of the current planning approval process.
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications
	Financial: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ SportNI funding deadline ➤ Cost of infill alternatives ➤ Costs associated with alternative maintenance contracts ➤ At least 15% added to overall cost of a new 3G pitch installation by using alternative infills
	Human: Staff Officer time included
	Risk Management: In order to decrease the associated risk of the use of rubber crumb infill, the Council will ensure that current state of the art containment solutions are implemented, and appropriate maintenance contracts are developed with IST's.
4.2	Screening & Impact Assessments
	Equality & Good Relations Implications: None anticipated at this juncture.
	Rural Needs Implications: None anticipated at this juncture.
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	To note the contents of this report and approve the recommendation for the new MUSA pitch to be developed based on current internationally recognised standards to include modern containment methods. These developments will be subject to continued planning consultations and guidance as part of planning approval processes.
6.0	Documents Attached & Reference
6.1	Appendix A: Sport NI Information Paper and Position Statement http://www.sportni.net/facilities/microplastics Appendix B: EU Microplastics Ban – Irish FA Statement