



# **SOUTH OXHEY PLAYING FIELDS**

## **GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN, 2024 – 2029**

### **BRIEFING DOCUMENT**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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This briefing document has been produced to guide the first stage of engagement that will support the writing of a Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) for South Oxhey Playing Fields.

The GAP will be produced by the Countryside Management Service (CMS) which is part of the Hertfordshire County Council Countryside and Rights of Way Service, on behalf of and in partnership with Three Rivers District Council (TRDC). The completed document will inform the management actions to be undertaken over the next five years, commencing April 2024.

GAPs are map-based management plans and are invaluable documents that give focus and direction to the running and improvement of all types of open space. They provide a clear and logical process to determine the activities that should take place on a site over a stated period to meet agreed project objectives and core aspirations.

It is our intention to engage the community in a structured way to ensure that stakeholders are fully aware of the plan production process. Engagement will be encouraged and opportunities to feed into the plan in a constructive and timely way promoted locally. This document is intended to initiate and support this process.

This document has been broken down into easy-to-read sections:

- Background information and historical context;
- A review of current management operations;
- An outline of the aim and objectives of the plan, and how we intend to use and present the document; and
- A summary of the engagement method, a part of the GAP production process that specifies how and when stakeholders will be involved.

## 2. BACKGROUND

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South Oxhey Playing Fields is an area of Public Open Space located in the Green Belt in a residential area of South Oxhey. The site is extensive, approximately 49 hectares in area, and is composed of a semi-natural habitat mosaic of broadleaved woodland, secondary scrub, open field trees and groups of trees, and semi-improved grassland.

The site is accessible from numerous entrance points including gates on Green Lane, Hampermill Lane, Ashburnham Drive, and Hayling Road. Footpath Watford Rural 027 leads into the site although no Public Rights of Way cross the site. The London Outer Orbital Path (LOOP) walking trail is waymarked through the site.

Woodland on site is fragmented and is a mixture of woodland with ancient features and secondary (more recently developed) woodland. The historic woodlands on site are collectively designated as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) - named 'South Oxhey Playing Field Woods' (90/005/01) - due to: ancient woodland remnants with a semi-natural canopy and field evidence suggesting an ancient origin; some fragments shown on Bryant's map (1822); and the presence of woodland indicators.

The ancient woodland areas, including Ox Pasture Spring in the north, Hampermill Wood and Hampermill Spring in the west, and a central area known as Big Wood, support predominantly Pedunculate Oak and Hornbeam standards with some ancient Hornbeam coppice, Hazel coppice, Ash, Wild Cherry, Rowan, Field Maple, Holly and Hawthorn. Non-native tree species including Sycamore, Norway Maple, Laurel and Rhododendron are also present. The woodlands are generally heavily shaded due to dense secondary regeneration and closed canopies of over-stood hornbeam (multi-stem hornbeam no longer in active coppice management), and therefore the woodland floor is sparsely vegetated. Despite this, ground flora does include woodland indicators such as native Common Bluebell, Dog's Mercury, Broad Buckler-fern, Giant Fescue, Wood Meadow-grass and Three-nerved Sandwort. Access to woodlands is through informal walking paths, also used by bikes, which may contribute to the low cover of ground flora. Historic features include an ancient wood bank, located on the southern edge of Ox Pasture Spring, and several old pits. Groups of trees are scattered across the site, creating a parkland landscape.

Grassland is the most extensive habitat on site (approximately 30 hectares) and provides informal recreation opportunities – such as walking and exercising dogs – and formal recreation space on marked football pitches to the east of the site. Grassland is managed with a uniform amenity cut to the east of the site as well as in the centre, to the west of Big Wood. Grass is managed as long conservation grassland in the centre of the site to the east of Big Wood/west of Ox Pasture Spring, and to the far west. The grassland supports wildflowers which are indicators of semi-improved grassland, such as common bird's-foot trefoil and black knapweed.

A skate park, dog agility course, two artificial tennis courts, and an artificial multi-use games area (MUGA) are all located within the site, to the north-east. There is also two play areas within the site – Hayling Road Play Area in the south-east corner, and Ashburnham Drive Play Area to the south-west of Big Wood. Other facilities include benches, bins and dog bins.

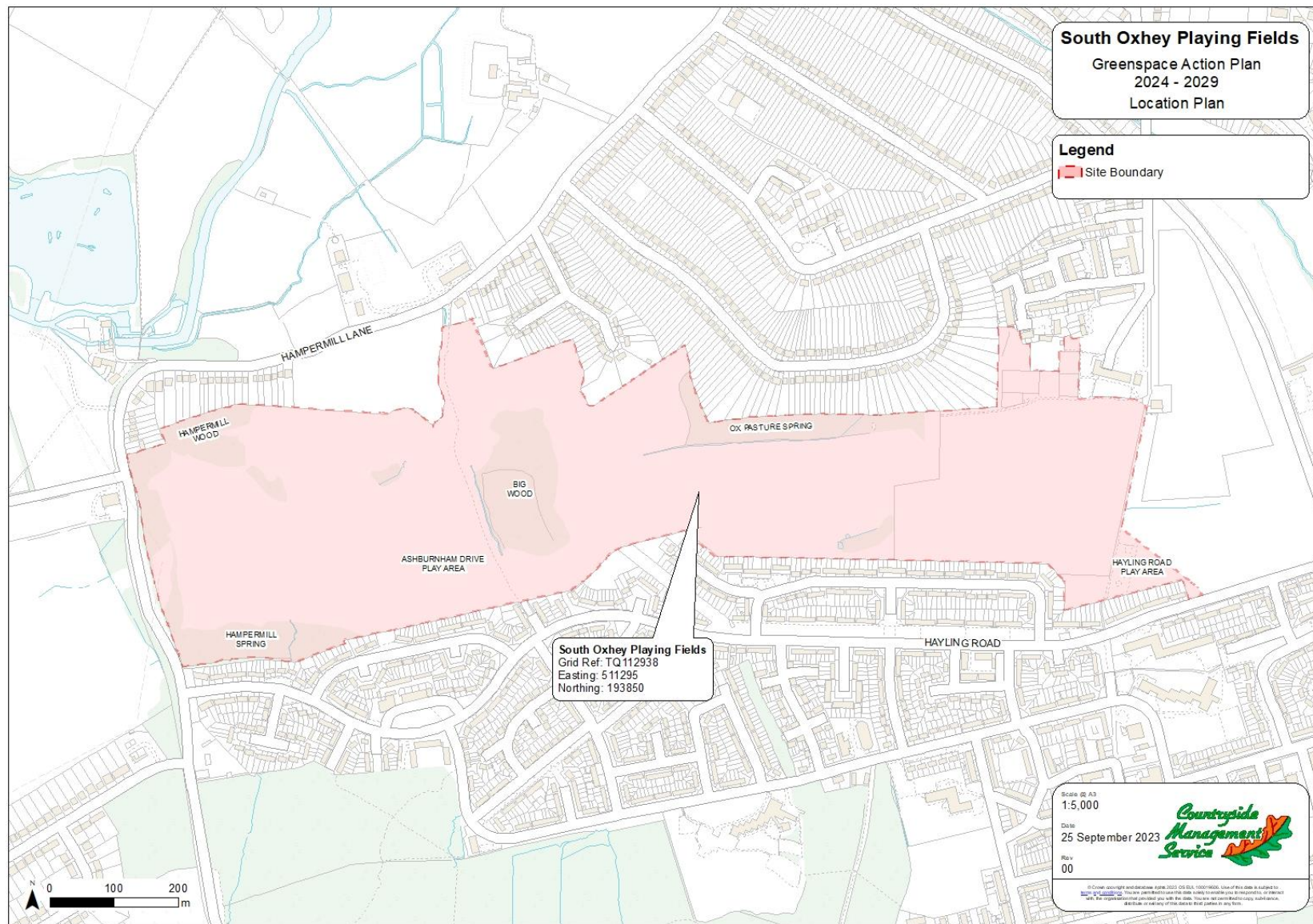


Figure 1: A map of the location of South Oxhey Playing Fields.

### 3. REVIEW OF PROGRESS

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Historic maps show that, before 1900, the South Oxhey Playing Fields site supported a greater area of historic woodland than is present today. For example, Ox Pasture Springs was more extensive and there were additional woodland sites named Long Spring and Round Spring which connected with the remnant Hampermill Spring wood.

The site became open to public use when a golf course operated on the site from 1912 to 1952. Prior to this, the site was divided into several irregular parcels of open land and woodland which were most likely managed as grazing pasture and hornbeam coppice with oak standards (a woodland management system typical of Hertfordshire). Conversion to a golf course is likely to have resulted in landscape modification, leading to a reduction in woodland cover and accounting for the distinct profile of the site today.

In 1952 the site was named South Oxhey Playing Fields, and in 1989 site ownership and management transferred to TRDC. The site is largely unchanged in character from the mid-1950s, although greater recreational opportunities have been added such as grass pitches for football, benches, play and exercise equipment, skate park, and artificially surfaced tennis courts. Aspirations for the site are to promote recreational opportunities, site facilities, and their use to a diverse user group – recent work has already improved this with the renovation of the skate park and tennis courts, and the development of a dog agility course and MUGA court.

There are several site entrances located around the site, many of which are not clearly marked and lack site information. An aspiration for the site is to improve site visibility and encourage appropriate use of the site. For example, installing signage at less used entrances to provide information on site facilities and installing interpretation at well used entrances to engage visitors in the heritage and conservation significance of the site. The London Loop is the only waymarked walking route which crosses the site. Marking out short and long walking trails through the site, with accompanying interpretation (e.g. on entrance signs), could improve visitor experience and celebrate the heritage of the site.

Habitat management on site has primarily been amenity focused. The approach to woodland management has been non-intervention, with the exception of tree safety works. Grassland is managed under a regular cutting regime across the site. In recent years areas of grassland have been selected to expand conservation management by ceasing cutting in summer months to allow flowering and seed set. This management aims to promote botanical and invertebrate diversity and to create an attractive habitat feature. Regularly mown access paths can maintain access in these conservation grassland areas.

Past volunteer management tasks on site, coordinated by the CMS, include installing waymark posts by CMS volunteers and clearing scrub around parkland trees.

Aspirations for future habitat management of the site are to improve the balance between managing for amenity and conservation. Ambitions include maintaining and enhancing the semi-natural character of the site and conserving historic features such as ancient wood banks by controlling scrub encroachment. Selective thinning of dense secondary regeneration to open woodland canopies would encourage a greater cover and diversity of woodland wildflowers. Selective coppicing of old multi-stem hornbeam would reinstate traditional woodland management and ensure longevity of these heritage trees. We aim to continue conservation management of parts of the grassland.



## 4. GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN 2024 – 2029

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The South Oxhey Playing Fields GAP 2024 - 2029 will be a simple, easy to read plan for use by officers of TRDC and members of the public. It will also act as a guide to the work of volunteers. The GAP will be largely map based with maps to show the management actions planned for each year. The resulting change will be represented on the map for the following year. The document will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains effective and relevant.

The plan will be costed and potential funding sources identified. The plan will be aspirational and delivery of the actions will be dependent on the council's success in accessing funding from a variety of internal and external sources.

The aim and objectives of the GAP will be as follows:

### Aims

To conserve and enhance the semi-natural character of the site – in particular promoting healthy and diverse woodland and grassland habitats – and maintain the site as a safe and enjoyable place to visit for all members of the local community.

### Objectives

#### A. A Welcoming Place

- A1 Improve visibility of South Oxhey Playing Fields at less well-used entrances by installing welcome posts, information signs, and improving entrance structures.
- A2 Improve access to South Oxhey Playing Fields at less prominent entrances by managing vegetation and reducing shading of desire lines.
- A3 Install additional features of interest, such as further interpretation and signage at pertinent locations which explain the heritage and conservation value of ancient woodland features, and celebrate the history of the site.
- A4 Design and promote short and long walking routes through the site.
- A5 Establish a wildflower maze to the west of Big Wood – see example in Photo 1.



*Photo 1: A wildflower maze established at an East Herts District Council park – photo taken in April, before flowering season.*

## **B. Healthy, Safe and Secure**

- B1 Promote appropriate recreational use of the site to a wide diversity of user groups in the local community and discourage site misuse or anti-social behaviour.
- B2 Carry out scheduled tree safety surveys, and complete reactive and planned tree works to address safety issues.

## **C. Well Maintained and Clean**

- C1 Enforce TRDC Public Space Protection Order.
- C2 Remove graffiti and fly tipping.
- C3 Maintain site infrastructure.
- C4 Regularly empty bins and litter pick.
- C5 Deliver grounds maintenance contract including amenity grass cutting in east of site.

## **D. Sustainability**

- D1 Ensure ongoing management costs are financially sustainable.
- D2 Carry out management according to environmental best practice by avoiding the use of pesticides and herbicides, planning vegetation management operations to limit disturbance to wildlife, and identifying opportunities to enhance biodiversity potential (i.e. retaining deadwood from tree safety operations).
- D3 Identify and apply to external funding sources for capital works where available.

## **E. Conservation and Heritage**

- E1 Thin dense tree stands in woodland compartments to promote healthy tree growth and a diverse species and age structure.
- E2 Reinstate coppicing across a proportion of over-stood hornbeam in woodland to promote vigour and longevity of these historic features.
- E3 Control non-native rhododendron and laurel regrowth in Ox Pasture Spring and Big Wood.
- E4 Manage woodland edges to reduce scrub encroachment on historic wood banks and to create a soft/graduated boundary between woodland and grassland habitat.
- E5 Implement a Forestry Commission woodland management plan inclusive of all areas of woodland within the site.
- E6 To conserve the historic parkland landscape and prepare the next generation of scattered trees, plant or protect self-set oak saplings in open conservation grassland, ensuring protection or planting is suitable to mowing schedules and locations.
- E7 Plant new hedgerow along the south boundary of the site to increase habitat, enhance habitat connectivity and improve the landscape within the site.
- E8 Maintain conservation management of grassland areas to west of site to promote botanical and invertebrate diversity.



## **F. Community Involvement**

- F1 Create opportunities for local community involvement in the management of the site with structure and support through regular CMS volunteer tasks, ensuring all involved have the opportunity to contribute towards achievement of the GAP objectives.
- F2 Encourage use of the site by a wide range of user groups including organised sports groups using pitches and tennis courts, dog walkers, Parkrun, adjacent land users, and individuals.

## **G. Marketing**

- G1 Engage the local community at every stage of GAP engagement process.
- G2 Promote the site as a valuable community resource to a wide audience through a variety of media platforms, including a web resource and social media.

## 5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PLAN PRODUCTION PROCESS

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Effective community engagement is at the centre of a successful GAP. Their particular value as documents comes from balancing the thoughts and aspirations of stakeholders and interest groups throughout the writing process.

In order to enable as many stakeholders and interest groups as possible to have the opportunity to feed into the production of the new GAP, we have adopted a structured two-stage approach to this engagement.

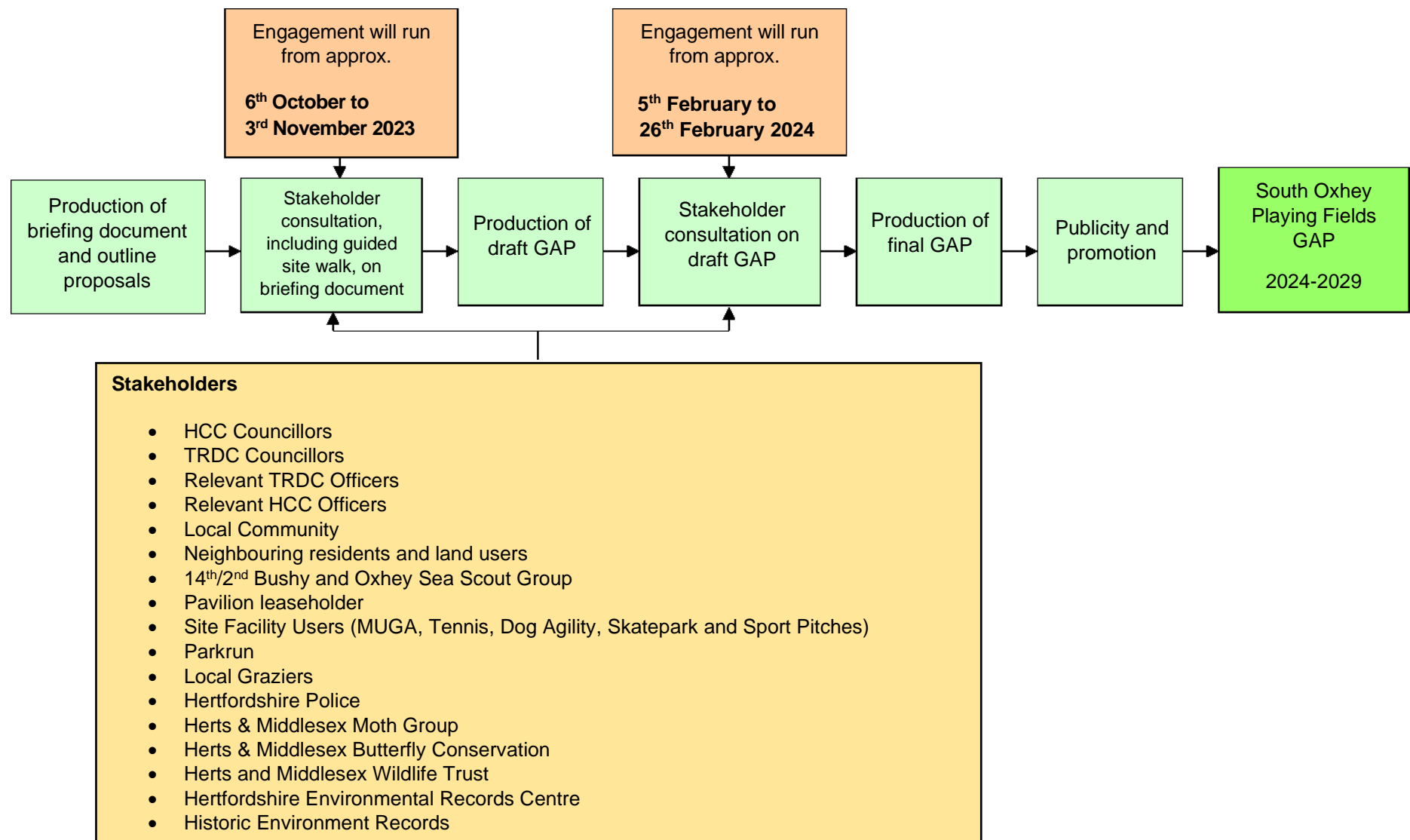
For the first stage, stakeholders and site users from the wider community will be invited to make comment on the core aspirations that are being put forward as part of this Briefing Document. It is hoped that any further aspirations and/or issues will be addressed through this information gathering process. This first stage of community engagement will run between **Friday 6<sup>th</sup> October** and **Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2023**, with a site walk guided by CMS planned for **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> October** – everyone welcome.

For the second stage, stakeholders and site users from the wider community will be invited to read, and make comment on, the draft GAP, which will include detailed proposals and actions. This stage will run between approximately **Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February** and **Monday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2024**. To support this stage, where there is sufficient interest we can offer a guided walk and engagement session for any users or interested groups that may wish to discuss the proposals or a particular aspect in more detail. Any arrangements for this event would be confirmed and advertised nearer the time.

Following this exercise, the final document will be produced, published and promoted more widely to the general public.

Please be aware that we will not respond individually to comments received. Instead we will produce a summary of comments, noting any amendments made to the plan as a result. This engagement response document will be published online alongside the briefing document, draft plan and final plan. We will retain contact details only for the purpose of keeping respondents informed about the plan development process.

The following diagram shows the GAP production process:



## 6. STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

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Thank you for taking the time to read this document. We are keen to receive feedback from you on the proposals for the South Oxhey Playing Fields GAP 2024 - 2029.

The guided site walk will take place on **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2023, meeting at 1pm** in the car park on Green Lane, Watford, WD19 4LT.

Please return your comments using the contact details below by **Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2023** at the latest.

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