

## **PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE**

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**Date:** Monday, 3 July 2023  
**Title:** Pre-Season Football Pitch Update  
**Contact Officer:** Operations Manager - Angus Whitburn

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### **Background**

Spartan Rangers have contacted Witney Town Council with concerns about pitch provision for the upcoming 2023-24 football season. Their concerns stem from the possibility of a large number of adult teams playing next season on already oversubscribed pitches. It's a concern officers also have as all the 11-a-side pitches are already hugely oversubscribed and it's unknown if current clubs will add additional 11-a-side teams for the council to try and allocate.

### **Current Situation**

#### **Current Status of Town Council Pitches**

Witney Town Council manages four recreation grounds that host football, The Leys, Burwell, West Witney and King Georges. These grounds have a total of 25 pitches made up of the following;

- 6 x 11-a-side's
- 6 x 9-a-side's
- 7 x 7-a-side's
- 6 x 5-a-side's

Burwell recreation ground hosts three of these 11-a-side pitches (all with junior inset pitches), King George's has a single 11-a-side pitch and West Witney has the final two. One of these 11-a-side pitches at West Witney is normally left unplayable during late autumn and winter due to ground conditions meaning the teams allocated to that pitch have to be pushed to other grounds, further oversubscribing them.

The recommended amount of play for adults on undrained pitches is two hours. Currently, all of the council 11-a-side pitches, which are all undrained are receiving around 6 – 8 hours of play a week, some of this however comes from 13 - 16-year-old teams. The problem this is causing is the pitches aren't recovering enough before being played on again, compacting ground which is compounding the drainage issues and then leading to grass loss with the pitches ultimately becoming waterlogged. There is an additional issue wear junior 11-a-side

teams play on the pitches in the morning then leaving them unplayable for adult teams in the afternoon.

The grounds maintenance team contend with these issues using aeration equipment to help keep the pitches playable through the winter months. This process has been improved by bringing the grounds maintenance contract back in-house; the council also invested in linear aeration equipment, meaning multiple aeration processes can be carried out a year. This process managed to keep both 11-a-side pitches playable at West Witney deeper into the winter than had been achieved in recent years.

## **Solutions**

### **East side of the Leys Recreation Ground**

At the Stronger Communities committee in January 2020, it was decided that the east side of the Leys was to be solely used as an events field and no longer host football as it could not be used for both purposes. The compaction in the ground had reached such a level that it was unsafe for play and with the continued event programme there was no opportunity to alleviate this compaction. Out of interest, the field was tested again last year and produced a similar gravities rating. The STRI inspector was asked what would it require to get the area playable again for football. The recommendations were to introduce fallow years and reduce the event programming before decompaction was attempted.

### **Leys Recreation Ground Cricket Square**

The Cricket wicket at the Leys has become completely disused since the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Attempts were made by officers in 2021 to see if there was any interest in its continued use. Although clubs did express interest in women's team use and junior use, no bookings have been placed. The square is maintained to a basic level so if a booking was to come in it could be prepped for low league cricket. If the square was to be removed an 11-a-side pitch would fit into the west side of the leys.

The square would require some work to make it playable for football and would require a full soil exchange to remove the majority of the club loam used in cricket square. The renovation work to convert the square could start in early autumn and the pitch could potentially be ready by early winter 2023 or January 2024.

## **Environmental impact**

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

## **Risk**

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

The council is and should be supporting the development of youth football and any decision made that could impact this would be seen negatively. However, the council should also be supporting adult football and it's a vital form of recreation for Witney's adult teams. Similarly, the events hosted at the Leys do draw large crowds from Witney and the surrounding towns so like football, these also need the support of the council.

The removal of the cricket square at the Leys and the placement of an 11-a-side pitch would sacrifice two 7-a-side pitches. The demand for these pitches is nowhere near the level of 11-a-side pitches.

The removal of the cricket square at the Leys could also bring bad press as cricket has been played on the field for over 100 years' Although the cost to maintain the square is a point of criticism for the council as there is no visible play on the square. The town's main club Witney Swifts have relocated to West Witney Sports Ground.

## **Financial implications**

Described here or as stated in the report above.

- With the in-house ground maintenance team, the cost to decompact the Leys would be relatively small and only come at the additional labour and fuel requirements for the task.
- The sports equipment budget for the leys, 4046/202 would cover the cost of two aluminium socketed goalposts.
- The council has a stock of topdressing that can be used for a soil exchange of the cricket and all the equipment required is part of the grounds maintenance operation.

## **Recommendations**

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. How they would like to proceed with the issue, the Committee could:
2. Delegate to officers to review the event schedule and report back to council with recommendations on the reduction of events and/or;
3. Delegate to officers to research into any future requirement of the cricket square at the Leys and;
4. If there is found to be no future requirement of the cricket square, commit to removing it and placing an 11-a-side pitch on the west side of the Leys recreation ground.