

## **POLICY, GOVERNANCE & FINANCE COMMITTEE**

---

**Date:** Monday, 20 November 2023

**Title:** Grounds Maintenance Review – Direct Works Operations Team

**Contact Officer:** Head of Estates and Operations

---

### **Background**

For the last 32 years Witney Town Council have employed the services of others to maintain grounds and estates. In October 2022 a proposal was put to Council members to bring the grounds maintenance services in house to be delivered by a direct works team. This was approved by the Council and a new structure was built to manage and deliver these services.

After 12 months of Witney Town Council proving this service the detail of the level or performance, challenges, achievements and lessons learnt are detailed in this document.

### **Grass cutting**

Within ground maintenance duties, grass cutting is the most time-consuming and intensive task on equipment and staff. When officers were managing the grounds contract being delivered by a contractor this was the number one topic of discussion at each meeting and it required constant frequent site visits by officers to review. The contractors constantly struggled with staff and equipment not being available for the scheduled cuts leading to complaints by the town's residents and sports clubs. It would typically take 2 weeks for the contractors to cut Witney Town's estate, where now it takes the in-house direct works team 4 days.

When bringing this service in-house the grass-cutting regime was a priority to improve, and a move to cut grass to a height specification rather than a set number of cuts per calendar month was introduced. Initially this proved to be challenging as the team needed to understand the grass growth patterns in line with the weather conditions. However, once mastered it led to cutting grass when it was required, reducing planned cuts when deemed to be unnecessary and freeing up staff for other tasks.

Although on review Witney Town Council grass cutting regime has been greatly improved the council has still had to field a large number of complaints from residents. This has mainly been found to do with the reduced grass-cutting regimens of other authorities.

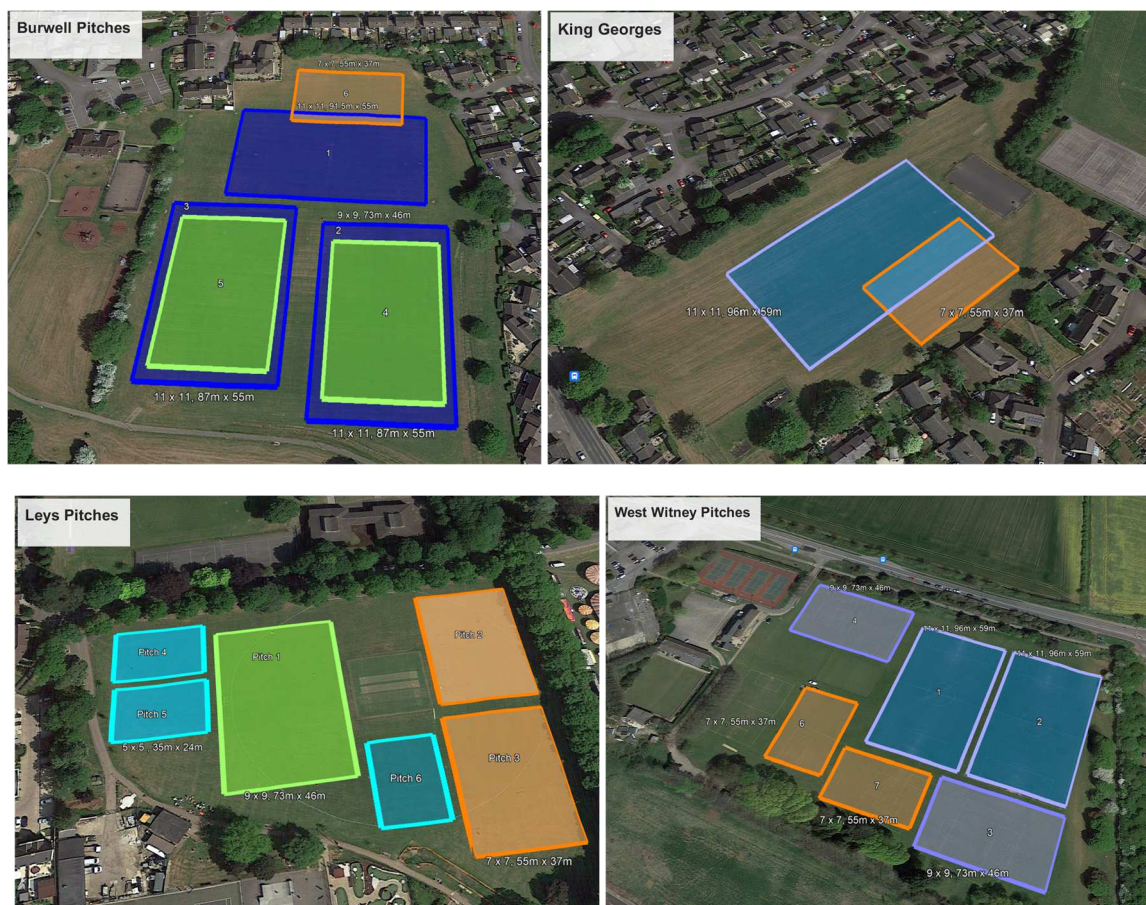
## Football Pitch Renovations

The annual football pitch renovations traditionally start in April when weather permits. The process involves aeration, topdressing and seeding required to maintain the pitch standards necessary.

The STRI pitch inspection report for 2023 produced outstanding results with improvements on previous years. Grass coverage had improved, and compaction was hugely reduced, to a level that would be expected from traditional football training grounds. It is believed the contractors weren't sufficiently aerating the fields and also not applying the required amount of topdressing.

The renovation process by the Council's operations team was an immense undertaking that required all the pitches to be aerated and spread 65 tonnes of topdressing over each 11a'side pitch. This process was all completed in the first two weeks of April with a contractor coming in near the end of April to seed the fields with tractor-driven seed drills.

The top-dressing unit was hired to avoid the large procurement cost, due to it only being used once a season this was the most economical decision. The seeding was also carried out by contractors due to the cost of the equipment and its limited usage but also the skills required to use that equipment.



## Fine Turfs

The cricket squares and bowls greens require a high level of maintenance with an enhanced cutting regime, regular thatch and aeration, and herbicidal applications.

Along with football pitch renovations, this presented a challenge to ensure the team gained the knowledge and expertise to prepare and maintain. Officers researched the correct products and equipment applications and completed training. STRI provided a specification and along with the experience from the TUPE staff this work went exceptionally well.

Procuring the equipment in time proved to be challenging however the Council now have a well maintained suite of equipment to manage the estate and grounds.



## Flower planting

Flower planting happens twice annually, once for spring and summer and again for autumn and winter. This task involves stripping the bedding plants each period, renovating soil before each planting period recommences and watering. Hanging baskets are also included in this and for 2023 were entirely maintained by Witney Town Council.



The first autumn-winter bedding went very well, the council received a lot of compliments for the bedding that was planted. It's also understood from the TUPE staff that this is the first time the soil in the beds has been conditioned with manure. That extra attention to small details was hard to manage with the grounds contractors and it is satisfying to have full control of this now.

The Spring Summer bedding unfortunately didn't go so well due to supply issue whereby the original plants ordered by officers died in the supplier's nursery due to a cold spell. The replacement plants type made it hard to manage the original intended planting display. Along with the struggles in watering the plants, the flowers struggled to pop and add colour to the town. Watering was a tough task due to only having one vehicle that could transport the water tank. This meant that on certain days when watering was essential, it was missed due to that vehicle being required on more important tasks.

### **Hedge cutting**

Hedge cutting is done twice yearly with one large-scale cut in early autumn with a 2<sup>nd</sup> follow-up cut late in the winter avoiding the bird nesting season. The hedge-cutting operations also include cutting back overhanging branches and ringing ivy to kill off its growth up trees and fences.

The process has been fairly straightforward, and all the equipment purchased has performed as expected. The mapping process carried out by officers prior to the October 2022 transfer has massively helped the maintenance operatives in their duties.

### **Leaf clearance**

Leaf clearance is completed once a year when the trees have shed the majority of their leaves. The material is all collected, mulched down and delivered to the allotments or compost suppliers, or retained for the council's use. This operation took around 3 weeks to be completed from late October into November.

Equipment had to be hired in to complete this task due to procurement delay issues which have now been resolved. Leaf clearance was the first task which proved the effectiveness of the council being able to apply larger amounts of labour. The workforce completed leaf clearance in over half the time the previous contractor took resulting in improving safety for pedestrians and the appearance of our grounds estate.

### **Bin/litter collection**

In October 2022 we started the bin emptying regime on a reduced schedule compared to what had been issued to the previous contractors. This freed up more time in the winter months for other jobs and the team was able to be utilised to focus on more important tasks on ground's maintenance. This didn't reduce the standard of the bin and litter collections or prompt any complaints. The programme was then increased over the Spring and Summer which worked well to suit the demand.

Complaints were received regarding the Leys play area, however, this has been hard to manage as the site is its own worst enemy due to its popularity. The whole of the leys is litter picked and bins are emptied daily. The only improvement that can be made here would be to add more bins to the leys play area which has been scheduled.

### **Bus shelters, street furniture**

The maintenance, repairs, and upgrades have always been managed within the works team and delivered by contractors hence why there is not any comparison details within this document.

### **Staffing**

Three operatives from the previous contractor transferred over to Witney Town Council under TUPE. These and the six council maintenance operatives totalled a team of nine employees. The three TUPE staff exclusively worked on grounds maintenance tasks and the six council employees worked on both cemetery and building maintenance along with

grounds. A tenth part-time staff member joined the team in August and subsequently went full-time at the start of November.

Witney Town Council officers and operatives completed a series of training courses to ensure they are competent and suitably qualified to complete all required operations of the grounds maintenance specification. The three staff TUPE'd over also provided group training sessions with Town council operatives to share their knowledge and experience.

## **Equipment**

A challenge with bringing the grounds contract in-house has been the procurement of the equipment. The situation with Ukraine had an impact on the suppliers of agricultural equipment which resulted in many of the grounds maintenance tasks having to be completed with hired equipment or delays to the grounds maintenance programme. Over the course of the year, all the equipment required has now been purchased and in the Council's possession.

Listed below is the main equipment procured not including handheld powered equipment.

- 3 x 26" pedestrian mowers
- 32" stand on mower
- 52" sit on zero turn mower
- 72" ride on front deck mower
- 320cm tractor-driven mower
- Cut and collect machine.
- Debris loader
- 63hp Tractor
- Tractor-driven linear decompactor
- Tractor driven splitter
- Tractor driven harrows
- Tractor driven hedge cutting bar
- 51cm cartridge mower for fine turfs
- Pedestrian aerator



Officers produced a specification for the equipment required taking into account the demand, the layout of cemeteries, the various tasks, and the skills and training required to operate. All equipment has proved to be fit for purpose without any examples where the equipment hasn't been up to the task required proving this process has been well researched and successful.

There are always areas for improvement and as mentioned in the report a second 32"- 36" ride-on mower or 1.2m tractor-mounted mower would speed up particular mowing tasks. Also, a front-mounted flail for the 72" ride-on mower would offer greater flexibility to control longer grass, this would also maximise the application of this machine.

## **Vehicles**

The Council had five vehicles at the start of the contract (including the halls van). This created issues with nine members of staff to get them in vehicles and to the location of their work. This problem was compounded by the loss of 2 vehicles each day at 16:30 that the TUPE'd

staff were taking home, (a conditioned carried over from their previous employment). The problems have eased as new vehicles have been purchased and careful planning by management.

The council's ageing vehicles required replacing before the start of the contract so a plan to replace and purchase additional vehicles was produced. This process will be completed in November when the last of the vehicles arrive. This will improve the service the Council provide making our operations more effective and efficient.

In alignment with the Council declaring a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019, an electric vehicle is now part of our fleet.

Below is the vehicle pool once it's completed in November.

- Ford Transit - Tipper
- Nissan Cabstar - Tipper
- Mitsubishi Fuso - tipper
- Isuzu D-max - flatbed truck
- Peugeot Partner – panel van
- Peugeot Expert – panel van (purchased used)
- Nissan Townstar – Electric panel van

Officers would like to undertake another review of the current vehicle pool in December in view of replacing poor functioning vehicles both in age and effectiveness.

#### **Improvements for 2023-24**

As mentioned in the report there are two pieces of equipment that would help for the next year of grounds maintenance however, they aren't essential. Also, a second round of vehicle renewals would help eliminate issues with the current fleet.

It would also be recommended by officers that the council look at contracting out the hanging basket maintenance or look at a new part-time role almost exclusively looking after them. The previous contractors subcontracted these duties out due to the vehicles and equipment requirements plus the early morning start required.

## **Financial**

The total sum of expenditure from October 2022 to October 2023 after bringing the grounds maintenance contract in-house was £750k.

This included the costs for grounds and general maintenance, and the Council depot related costs as well as purchasing the necessary machinery, equipment and extra vehicles required to deliver the service along with the additional staff TUPE'd over from the previous contractor.

In comparison the previous year's total expenditure at £744k this was very similar noting this included the ground maintenance being delivered by a contractor at £397k.

There is a proposal to increase next year's expenditure by circa £50k to enable the Town Council to absorb the additional grounds being transferred by the District Council and continue to invest in machinery and equipment required.

There is still a contingency sum in the staffing budget which we are presently reviewing to ensure we have the correct number to suit the current and future workloads.

## **Investment for next year (2024/25)**

### **Machinery and Equipment**

The equipment itemised below has been identified to improve our service delivery.

- £5,575 ex VAT for a Trimax FX155 front mount flail to extend use of existing machinery maximising efficiencies.
- £5,449 ex VAT for a Trimax Striker 150 tractor-mounted mower to fit on the new compact tractor.
- £15,000-£30,000 for a ride on mower. At this stage this requires further research for accurate costing.

### **Vehicles**

The vehicles listed below are due for replacement with the most recent quotations included.

- Ford transit with a renewal fund of £22,878 to be replaced with a Mitsubishi FUSO - tipper body (or equivalent) at circa £34,000 ex VAT. Note trade-in value of circa £12,000.
- Peugeot Partner was bought used as a temporary vehicle due to long delays on new vehicle purchasing to be replaced with a Nissan Townstar (Electric) at £30,518 ex VAT

## Summary Table

<p><b>ACHIEVEMENTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing a high standard of service demonstrating value for money</li> <li>• Maintaining grass to a height standard.</li> <li>• Increasing customer satisfaction.</li> <li>• Improved service at a reduced cost.</li> <li>• STRI pitch inspection report results.</li> <li>• Autumn/Winter bedding plants.</li> <li>• Variable bin/litter collection programme.</li> <li>• Equipment purchased, VFM and fit for purpose.</li> </ul>	<p><b>CHALLENGES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receiving complaints that are not the Town Councils responsibility.</li> <li>• Fine Turf maintenance skills.</li> <li>• Procuring equipment.</li> <li>• Spring/Summer bedding plants and hanging baskets.</li> </ul>
<p><b>RISK</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retaining staff – low risk as team is motivated and well managed</li> <li>• Reliability of vehicles and machinery – low risk as good maintenance and replacement regime in place</li> <li>• Injury to staff or public – low risk due to safety procedures</li> <li>• Unsatisfied town residents – low due to the team and standards in place</li> </ul>	<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purchasing carefully selected machinery and equipment to reduce labour hours.</li> <li>• A second 32”- 36” ride-on mower or 1.2m tractor-mounted mower would speed up particular mowing tasks. Also, a front-mounted flail for the 72” ride-on mower would offer greater flexibility to control longer grass, this would also maximise the application of this machine.</li> </ul>

## Recommendations

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

1. Do we want to continue providing hanging baskets at £4,000-5,000 per year?
2. If the answer to item 1 is yes - It is recommended that the council assign officers to review the feasibility of either contracting out the hanging basket maintenance or recruit a fixed term role to maintain them. The previous contractors subcontracted these duties out due to the specific seasonal requirements, vehicles and equipment necessary.
3. To approve the following additional budget for next year's
  - a. £5,575 ex VAT for a Trimax FX155 front mount flail to extend use of existing machinery maximising efficiencies.
  - b. £5,449 ex VAT for a Trimax Striker 150 tractor-mounted mower to fit on the new compact tractor.
  - c. £15,000-£30,000 for a ride on mower. At this stage this requires further research for accurate costing.



- d. Ford transit with a renewal fund of £22,878 to be replaced with a Mitsubishi FUSO - tipper body (or equivalent) at circa £34,000 ex VAT. Note trade-in value of circa £12,000.
- e. Peugeot Partner was bought used as a temporary vehicle due to long delays on new vehicle purchasing to be replaced with a Nissan Townstar (Electric) at £30,518 ex VAT