

**PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Monday, 30 October 2023

At 6.00 pm in the Gallery Room, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor D Newcombe (Chair)

Councillors:	J Aitman	D Edwards-Hughes
	T Ashby	R Smith
	R Crouch	S Simpson
Officers:	Sharon Groth	Town Clerk
	Adam Clapton	Deputy Town Clerk
	Mark Lewis	Head of Estates & Operations
	Nigel Warner	Responsible Financial Officer
Others:	No members of the public.	

PR567 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Cllr O Collins.

PR568 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr D Newcombe declared a personal non-prejudicial interest for agenda item 11b as he was a member of an affiliated club at West Witney Sports Ground.

There were no other declarations from Members or Officers.

PR569 MINUTES

The minutes of the Parks & Recreation Committee meeting held on 4 September were received.

PR457 – Following a question by a Member, it was confirmed a new energy efficient gas boiler had been installed at Burwell Hall. It would offer more control along with reduced costs and consumption; reports would follow in due course on associated savings.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Parks & Recreation Committee meeting held on 4 September be approved as a correct record of the meeting and be signed by the Chair.

PR570 PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no members of the public present.

PR571 **FINANCE REPORT: INCLUDING REVISED REVENUE BUDGET 2023/24 AND DRAFT BASE REVENUE BUDGET FOR 2024/25**

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO concerning the base revenue budget, draft estimates on budget parameters for 2023-24 and a revenue budget summary.

For the benefit of new Members, the RFO outlined the contents of the report and explained that although monitoring takes place throughout the year, this was the first report of the Committee budget setting cycle and a greater understanding of the estimates for 2024-25 would be known by the time of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting in November.

Members heard the Council had an ambitious programme of large projects and although these would be a strain on its finances, there were healthy earmarked reserves in place. Members should however be mindful of pressure on staff resources to deliver.

During this process, the Committee were told the RFO scrutinises budget lines and looks at the inflationary rises since the last budget, which currently stood at 6.7%. There were other external matters to be considered including public sector pay increases, potential energy increases due to world events and in the previous financial year, the cost-of-living crisis which resulted in a deficit revenue budget with funds taken from reserves; this was not sustainable indefinitely.

The RFO explained that the year-to-date totals in the report were showing less than half yearly amounts as they only covered five months expenditure and costs were slightly lighter than the previous year; it was prudent to slightly overestimate when setting the budget.

Regarding budget line anomalies, Members were advised water rates at the Leys Splash Park had been higher than anticipated due to ongoing repairs and mechanics of the system throughout the summer period; a planned refurbishment from earmarked reserve was proposed as a special revenue project beginning in 2024-25. They also heard that the figures regarding the Coffee Shed at The Leys would differ to those planned a year ago due to the Leys Masterplan and income in this area, including around electricity charges, would be defined by a new lease once works were completed.

Finally, the income from football letting was more than expected, this highlighted the growth of clubs and pressure on the Council's pitches since the time of the last budget, set while exiting the Covid-19 pandemic. This had a knock-on effect of additional Council costs which had also gone up proportionally; a current subsidy figure, analysing the difference of an in-house ground's maintenance team would be provided at a future date.

Recommended:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, current subsidy figures for the provision of football pitches be calculated and,
3. That, the draft revised base revenue budget for 2023/24 and the estimated base revenue budgets for 2024/25, as detailed be agreed.

Cllr S Simpson joined the meeting at 6.14pm

PR572 REVENUE GROWTH ITEMS, SPECIAL REVENUE PROJECTS, AND CAPITAL PROJECTS

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO, tabled at the meeting concerning the financial standing of the Council's projects.

Members were advised of the funding streams and budgets in place for the revised capital and special revenue projects for 2023/24 and what was needed in order to bring about their completion.

Items proposed as capital and special revenue projects for 2024/25 and beyond included funding for play areas, maintenance for additionally adopted play areas and a path at West Witney Sports Ground to facilitate Parkrun. Match crowdfunding was noted for this last suggestion, as well as for clubs or organisations asking for 'home' signs for their organisations at Council facilities.

In addition, Members discussed the refurbishment of the Leys Splash Park in 2025 and agreed that internal research and consultation into short- and longer-term improvements should take place in the summer of 2024; this based on the assumption only small outward tweaks might be necessary alongside larger water retention improvements which were required following the maintenance during this summer. Repair funds may need to be added into the budget for 2024/25 so the renewals fund remained intact for this project.

Recommended:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the Council explores the renewal of the Splash Park in 2024, to include consultation and notes the current renewals budget and funds expended from this EMR in the current fiscal year and,
3. That, matched crowdfunding is suggested in relation to funding a hogging Path to facilitate Parkrun at West Witney Sports Ground.

PR573 SCHEDULE OF PROPOSED FEES AND CHARGES 2024/25

The Committee received and considered proposed recreational charges for 2024-25 as part of the budget setting process.

In response to Members' questions, the RFO explained the variances of the 2023/24 and 2024/25 figures. Changes in the current year were due to the fact VAT was no longer being applied to sports bookings from February following a successful challenge to the HMRC on this issue nationally. The new year figures were proposed to increase the charges by 6.7%, this was based on the inflationary change in the previous year.

The Council was still waiting for VAT refunds back to 2019 based on the tribunal decision above and it had already agreed these would be repaid to the clubs when applicable. The RFO confirmed no VAT was payable on clubs and on commercial charges as they had a security of tenure so therefore no refunds would be due to them.

Members also heard that lease negotiations were underway with West Witney Tennis Club and Courtside CIC which included re-negotiation of their charges.

Recommended:

1. That, the proposed fees and charges for 2024-25 as presented, be agreed.

The RFO left the meeting at 6.50pm

PR574 SATISFACTION SURVEY COMMENTS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk concerning items raised from the Council's satisfaction survey earlier in the year.

Members noted several projects mentioned were underway or had been completed such as the refurbishments of the Skate Park and West Witney Sports & Social Club Clubhouse. A discussion took place regarding other items and raised questions on the apparent need, cost and whether they should be aspirations of the Council now or in the future. There was agreement they should be considered during budget-setting as they had been provided as feedback from the electorate.

Comments regarding open spaces were difficult to substantiate, but a meeting was planned with the County & District Council's and a review of the Town Council's grounds maintenance was underway; it was suggested that grounds maintenance standards could be developed for the open spaces.

The Committee were aware of the strain on infrastructure budgets and were reminded that the earmarked reserve for play areas was being expended in the current year, so some replenishment was required. There was also acknowledgement that the Leys play area surface was troublesome in the winter, it was hoped this could be looked at during the planned 2025 refurbishment of the Splash park.

Bins and benches were always required so Members agreed it would be helpful to increase a budget in this area; benches at the allotments and a picnic bench at Raleigh crescent play area were mooted as suggestions in the new fiscal year along with advertising the Council's memorial bench policy.

In regard to fencing at Oxlease Play area, there was a discussion as to whether this was needed as Members were not aware of the issue. It was agreed that, in relation to dog fouling, new recreation signage would help in this area and a query could be sent to the local Blake C of E Primary School for their thoughts on the matter.

Recommended:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, £40,000 is requested in the 2024/25 budget until an intelligent estimate based on the current need can be provided and,
3. That, £4,000 is requested in the 2024/25 budget towards play area/recreational infrastructure including bins & benches and,
4. That, the Council promotes its memorial bench policy and,
5. That, standards on open spaces are created to help benchmark future comments, compliments and complaints and,
6. That, details regarding dogs on leads and on dog waste disposal are included on the new recreational sign at Oxlease play area and,
7. That, the Council corresponds with Blake C of E Primary School to obtain feedback on fencing at Oxlease play area and,
8. That, consideration of improved surfacing around the Splash Park at The Leys is given in the future refurbishment planned for 2025.

Cllr T Ashby left the meeting at 7.14pm

PR575 SPORTS PITCHES

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk/C.E.O alongside a report on the Council's grass sports pitches by STRI (formerly the Sports Turf Research Institute).

Members welcomed such a positive report showing the improvement in all the pitches from the previous year. The weather this summer had helped towards achieving this, but the impact of the Council's new in-house ground's maintenance regime had also played its part and was a credit to its grounds team.

It was noted that cricket provision at The Leys was still a live issue, that there were comments in the report about the wicket at West Witney and the tests relating to the football pitches at The Leys. Members asked that the findings were communicated in the most appropriate way.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the positive improvement in the Council's grass sports pitches be welcomed and,
3. That, communications on this are issued via the appropriate channels.

PR576 EXCLUSION OF PRESS & PUBLIC

Resolved:

That in accordance with section 1(2) of the Public Bodies (admission to Meetings) Act 1960, and as extended by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the following business to be transacted

PR577 LEYS MASTERPLAN

The Committee received the confidential report and verbal update of the Head of Estates & Operations concerning the redevelopment of the Leys sports areas, known as the Leys Masterplan.

Members heard plans had been submitted to the Planning Authority by Courtside Hubs CIC who were spearheading the project and illustrative guides available to officers were provided. The timeframe outlined in the report to complete the scheme by May 2024 was ambitious, but Officers would be working with Courtside throughout the off-season to help achieve it, as well as delivering the redeveloped Skate Park which was affiliated to the overall project.

There was some concern from Members regarding a reduction in the number of tennis courts and the timeframe for the scheme with associated financial impact this may have on the Council as landowner; details on the obligations of the grant funding which was financing the project were passed on by the Town Clerk.

Resolved:

1. That, the confidential report and verbal update be noted.

PR578 **WEST WITNEY SPORTS & SOCIAL CLUB**

The Committee received and considered the report and verbal update of the Head of Estates & Operations concerning the refurbishment of West Witney Sports & Social Clubhouse.

Members agreed the general condition of the clubhouse meant the refurbishment was necessary and were pleased plans had been submitted to the Planning Authority. Further preliminary work regarding biodiversity obligations was required and officers hoped the work would be able to start in the new year.

Resolved:

1. That, the report and verbal update be noted.

PR579 **PROPERTY & LEGAL MATTERS**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk/C.E.O.

There were updates on the transfer of several play areas from West Oxfordshire District Council; Heads of Terms agreements had been received and these, along with further queries would be reviewed by the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee.

Members were also advised lease negotiations were pending with Courtside Hubs CIC & West Witney Sports and Social Club, and underway with Witney Lawn Tennis Club.

Resolved:

1. That, the confidential report be noted.

The meeting closed at: 7.48 pm

Chair