

## PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE

---

**Date:** Monday, 4 March 2024

**Title:** Cricket at The Leys & West Witney Sports Ground

**Contact Officer:** Operations Manager

### Background

Witney Town Council officers attended a meeting with District Council officers along with representatives from the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and the Oxfordshire Football Association (FA). The meeting was held to discuss the need for the provision of football and cricket at the Leys recreation ground.

District officers have met with Witney Swifts and Witney Mills Cricket Clubs to discuss the requirements for Cricket in Witney and the potential redevelopment of the sports provision at Monahan Way, Carterton. From those meetings, both clubs expressed an interest in protecting the Witney Leys recreation ground cricket square and the Swifts discussed a lease agreement they have been requesting from Witney Town Council.

Reports were previously submitted by the Operations Manager to the Parks and Recreation Committee on 3 July 2023 on the future of the Leys Cricket square following a request from Football teams and a request for a lease agreement for West Witney Cricket Ground from Witney Swifts.

The following resolutions were made by council on the Pre-Season Football Pitch update report.

1. That, officers speak with cricket clubs and former users of The Leys Cricket Square to establish demand and,
2. That, Officers contact the landowner of Henry Box School playing field to ascertain if it could be used for sporting activities and events and,
3. That, the Town Council writes to West Oxfordshire District Council to request that a playability report on the [*Windrush Place*] pitches is undertaken as soon as possible, and if suitable, that a temporary access is constructed to ensure the pitches can be used for the forthcoming season.

The following resolutions were made by council on the West Witney Cricket Rental Agreement report.

1. That, a decision is deferred to allow Officers to further explore options of improving the facility and,
2. That, Officers speak with Witney Swifts to ascertain if any improvements they desire can be made to the ground.

## **Current Situation**

### **Grounds Maintenance**

Meetings have been held with Witney Swifts since the Park and Recreation Committee meeting on 3 July 2023. These meetings have mainly been held with club representatives about the maintenance of the square and outfield after the decision from the council was made not to issue Swifts with a lease or user agreement. The square was maintained to the league standard throughout the remainder of the 2023 season, however it was found that an incorrectly timed rolling program and the spring weather conditions led to Swift's disaffection with the playing surface.

The council's maintenance team have performed every operation possible in the autumn and winter period to ensure the surface is to the highest standard. The series of works has been positively noted by Swift's representatives. Furthermore, communication between the two parties has improved and Swifts agreed not to start their rolling programme until the council has completed all season works required and the weather conditions permit.

### **Lease**

Swifts raised the topic of the lease again with officers from West Oxford District Council in meetings about Monahan Way Cricket Ground and cricket provision in Witney. Concern was raised that if a lease was issued Witney Town Council would lose an important facility that wouldn't be available to other clubs. There have been no further developments since the last report to the council regarding a lease apart from further requests for more clubs to use the ground.

The benefits of a lease still do not appear to outweigh the disadvantages; therefore it is recommended the council re-explore the introduction of a maintenance agreement with Witney Swifts. This would help the club to develop and expand more and offer them a guarantee that West Witney is their home. An agreement would enable the council to retain some level of control over the square for other teams but offer swifts autonomy to manage the maintenance for their games.

### **Leys Cricket Square**

A recent meeting with the Witney Swifts chairman was held to discuss the future requirements for Swifts cricket teams. The club have an interest in introducing a junior's team and third men's teams, both of these potentially playing on the Leys Recreation ground, if they are formed ready for the 2025 season. Swifts however have made great progress in introducing these new teams through the success of their 2nd men's team and junior development through the Dynamos and All-Stars cricket programs which are now starting their second year.

The league requirements for the level of a 3rd men's team means the health and safety issues surrounding the boundary shouldn't be an issue at the Leys as the requirement from the league is 36.5 meters. There are still of course multiple other health and safety issues to

overcome. Additionally, it was an aim of Courtside's development of the Leys to try and reintroduce cricket to the Leys recreation ground.

The council grounds team have maintained the Leys Cricket square to a basic standard, whilst unused, to ensure that it wouldn't be an onerous task to return it to a playing standard. The council would need to procure a set of sight screens and wicket covers.

### **Environmental impact**

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind 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 same risks outlined to the council in the reports of 3 July 2023 are still relevant. The key risk being the loss of a bookable facility. But also, a loss of control and potential effects of football which risks the condition of the ground.

Cricket has been played on the Leys for over 100 years and the loss of the Cricket Square could potentially draw bad press for Witney Town Council.

### **Financial implications**

There is a sports equipment budget: 4046/202 of £4,000.

Total expected new equipment cost would be £2,487.06.

Flat Sheet wicket covers:	£426.50 excl VAT
2 net sight screens:	£2,060.56 excl VAT

The cost to maintain the Leys cricket square is minimal as Witney Town Council owns the equipment for all fine turfs. Without cricket being played, the labour required for the square is also very low.

### **Recommendations**

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

1. Retain the cricket square on the Leys in its current state in preparation for the 2025 cricket season.
2. Defer the decision of a potential lease agreement for Witney Swifts on West Witney Sports Ground until the 2025 cricket season.
3. A report be presented to council at the next Parks & Recreation meeting on a maintenance agreement with Witney Swifts.