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**Agenda Item:** Leys Event Field Use

**Meeting Date:** 13<sup>th</sup> January 2025

**Contact Officer:** Operations Manager

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### Background

The east side of the Leys recreation ground known as the events field, ceased being used for football in 2020. The impact of having a full football season being played on the field along with a busy events schedule meant that the compaction of the field built up to an unsafe level. This unsafe level was similar to playing football on concrete, so the council made the decision at the Halls and Green Spaces Committee meeting on 13 January 2020 (H13 Refers) to exclusively use the field for events.

### Current Situation

Witney Town Council's sports pitches including cricket and bowls are inspected annually by the STRI group. These inspections recommend actions to officers to ensure pitches don't deteriorate and remain safe for play. STRI found in 2020 that the east side of the Leys was too compacted for play however their recommended actions could never be actioned because it would have involved reducing the events schedule.

The inspections by STRI in August 2024 found that the compaction levels of the events field have reduced considerably. The surface firmness has fallen to 185 gravities a reading which makes the field safe for sports to be played. The compaction has managed to elevate naturally through non-mechanical means by the cancellation of football plus events not taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The events field can accommodate an 11 a side pitch, these are oversubscribed across Witney Town Council grounds. To enable this to happen new goalposts would have to be purchased and sockets installed. Once completed the field could accommodate football for an entire season however, this would ultimately recompact the field. It wouldn't then be known if the field would be playable for the following season until the assessment by STRI in August of that year.

This does present an issue where no guarantees can be made to football clubs that football would be able to be played on the events field the following season. However, with goal sockets in place, the field would be able to have football be played. Officers would then have to manage the field each season in line with the weather and the events schedule. This may be more effective than in the years prior to 2020 as the council have since bought the ground maintenance in-house offering officers more flexibility to renovate in a staged approach.

There is limited time left in the 2024-25 season, should Members agree to commit to returning football to the Leys events field officers would be looking at making an 11 a side available in the 2025-26 season. This is because of the lead time and installation of goal posts plus providing notice to the teams to make bookings. The field could be used for junior football but the demand for the 2024-25 season isn't present plus this could lead to large growth within the clubs which would then present an

issue if the field was then unplayable the following seasons. But for an 11 a side football, the Leys is a good option for clubs that need alternative sites for waterlogged pitches at West Witney and King George V.

## **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 primary risk with reintroducing 11 a side football at the Leys is it not being a permanent facility. Clubs will need to understand that this pitch could only act as a temporary site, so they don't take its reintroduction as a chance to expand their teams. Witney Town Council would have to ensure it communicates this effectively with clubs.

## **Social Value**

Social value is the positive change the Council creates in the local community within which it operates.

The council should be seen as doing all it can in supporting grass roots football and in making the leys playable through an ad hoc method it is best utilising its facilities for this purpose.

## **Financial implications**

- If required, the materials required to renovate the 11 a side on the events field can be siphoned from the materials used for the Ley's recreation ground, so no additional expenditure would be required.
- The cost for a set of 24 ft x 8ft socket aluminium goals posts is £1,500.00 ex VAT, the sports equipment budget for 2025-26 would cover this: 4046/202 at £2,000.00

Member are invited to note the report and

1. Determine if the reintroduction of 11 a side football on the events field of the Leys Recreation Ground is to resume.