
Agenda Item:	Sports Pitch Update
Meeting Date:	Monday 1 September 2025
Contact Officer:	Operations Manager

Background

Witney Town Council manages 4 recreation grounds, facilitating seven 11-a-side football pitches and numerous junior pitches. The football season runs from September through to the end of April. From May through to the end of October; these pitches are then renovated and rested.

Clubs make bookings through Witney Town Council's bookings office, which will assign them pitches for their fixtures. Clubs have designated home grounds for league purposes, but there is the control to reassign teams to alternative pitches in case their home grounds are not available. This helps ensure pitches aren't left un-played and that as many teams as possible are getting their bookings.

Two requests have been received from Witney Vikings Football Club for the upcoming 2025-26 season; firstly to inset all available 11-a-side pitches with junior-size pitches. Secondly for a storage container on King George's field.

Current Situation

Renovations

The renovation programme was completed in early May, the earliest it could have been completed with the football season. However, due to the record dry weather in the spring and early summer, it has meant the pitches couldn't be aerated. The lack of rain has also led to most of the grass seed failing to germinate. This unfortunately means the pitches are in a poor condition heading into the 2025-26 season. The only way to have avoided this issue would have been to irrigate the fields, which is not feasible on public grounds.

When the rains pick up in the autumn, the pitches will be aerated, which will help to alleviate the compaction over the fields. This couldn't be carried out in spring because of the dry weather; it would have opened up huge cracks in the fields, making them unplayable for the 2025-26 season. Some high-wear areas (goal mouths) have recovered; however, some at Burwell and King George's completely failed. Due to this, the compacted ground has been dug out and replaced with fresh topsoil and then turfed. The grass coverage will be an ongoing challenge throughout the season, as little can be done; the main focus will be on relieving the

compaction in the field to ensure pitches don't become waterlogged for long periods in the rain.

Grants

Witney Town Council were successful in 2024 in obtaining a grant for West Witney Sports ground to financially assist in the renovation works required at the field. This grant pays out annual contributions until the year 2029. Officers made the application for West Witney as these pitches were regularly offline during the winter months when they become waterlogged. The hope was that the grant would assist in the installation of drainage; however, it only aided financially in the renovation works that were already taking place.

The grant application process proved difficult as the football foundation's system kept changing. The pitch reports also didn't return the outcome officers felt they should have, mainly due to the assessment being a desktop exercise rather than a physical inspection of the pitches. The same grant application was to be made for Burwell, but recently, FA officers have made the council aware of Football Foundation grants for pitch drainage and free drainage consultations.

The Council's current renovation programme exceeds the Ground Management Association's recommendations. So, although the grant received from the football foundation does help financially, it does little to actually physically improve the pitches, as the council were already investing that money. The additional income from the grant for renovation costs could mean the council have more funding available to support the potential costs of drainage.

Ground Allocation Trial

With the increase in Junior teams in Witney and the pressure this brings on the council to provide more pitches, there is the concept of allowing the junior clubs to be responsible for their grounds. All pitches would be marked and prepped weekly by the council, but the clubs would be responsible for managing the games on those grounds.

Vikings are allocated Burwell as a home ground and Tower Hill, West Witney. As West Witney is a larger ground, Vikings would be allocated the Leys as well, apart from one 9-a-side pitch and one 5-a-side pitch. There are some details to still work out with the trial, and meetings need to be arranged with each club to discuss the trials. The concept would help with the booking administration and reduce the loss of income for the council from cancelled games.

Insetting pitches

This is the process of marking smaller junior pitches within a larger 11-a-side pitch. This helps with pitch availability but does permit overplay. For example, a pitch could be played 2 or 3 times a day as opposed to once. Not allowing the pitch to adequately recover can cause damage to the turf and diminish the quality of the pitch.

Inset pitches have been present at Burwell for a few seasons. Burwell field has, for the last few years, been one of the better-performing fields thanks to its soil quality; however, over

the past two seasons, the field has struggled. There are many contributing factors to this, but the major one is that the pitches are being overplayed.

As the new 11-a-side pitch at the Leys will not be hosting an adult team until the new year, some junior pitches could be marked, in its place, to help, but these would then be lost when the changing rooms are built at the Leys and it can rehost a men's football team.

The only other ground that can be considered for inset pitches would be the West Witney; however, the field has required a lot of work to try and keep it online for the season, and the implementation of inset pitches would risk this.

Storage container at King George Field

King George could be better utilised by junior teams; a 7-a-side pitch was planned at King George's for the 2023-24 season, but was never booked. Viking have raised that they would require a 10ft storage container on site to make the site a more suitable location to book. And with Spartans moving to the Leys, it could become overall a better location for junior football in the new year and potentially training. The placement of the storage container would need permission from West Oxfordshire District Council, as it falls within a conservation zone.

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) Equality – Both junior clubs in Witney have female teams and have done a lot to help boost interest in the women's game.
- b) Crime & Disorder – Football games attract low levels of disorder, smashed bottles in changing rooms, excessive litter and bad language being reported but the situations are rare.

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.

Ground Allocation Trial

The Ground Allocation Trial would be risky, although it increases admin time, the ability for the council to manage all its grounds means that when grounds become waterlogged and unplayable, these teams can be offered alternative locations. West Witney performed well last season, but the weather was favourable, the ground regularly holds water, and in those situations, those teams need to move to alternative grounds. If the ground allocation trial were in effect, that would leave Tower Hill without 4 – 5 of its pitches, with no alternative.

Insetting Pitches

For the reasons stated in the report, the insetting of pitches is a risk that could result in further deterioration to football grounds.

Storage Container at King Georges

Utilising King George's Field for more football training and matches could result in complaints from residents about the parking situation, of which the council have received complaints before.

Financial implications

- The Grant from the Football Foundation for West Witney pays out a total of £27,948 over 6 years.
- Witney Vikings have confirmed they will cover the costs for the 10 foot shipping container at King George's Field.

Recommendations

Member are invited to note the report and

1. Instruct officers to meet with Junior Clubs to discuss a ground allocation trial.
2. Approve the placement of a storage container on King George's Field if approval is granted from West Oxfordshire District Council.
3. Consider the proposal of insetting pitches as detailed in the report.