
Agenda Item:	Sports Pitch Update
Meeting Date:	Parks & Recreation
Contact Officer:	Operations Manager

Background

Officers reported to members on the condition of pitches at the Parks and Recreation meeting on the 1st September 2025. The report detailed the renovations programme, grant funding and potential football team booking amendments. Officers raised the poor condition the pitches were in heading into the 2025-26 season, and that the renovations programme had been adjusted to address these issues. Additionally, at the time of the report, the STRI inspections were still due to take place, so members had not been updated on the consultants' findings.

Current Situation

STRI Report (attached as Appendix A)

The STRI report is positive, especially taking into account the challenging weather conditions the operations team have had to tackle in maintaining the sports surfaces. Summarising the report, the key points are the heavy thatch over both bowls' greens, which has been addressed in the renovation programme already. The other key takeaway is the weed coverage over West Witney and Burwell pitches; this will be addressed during the spring in 2026, in line with the council's pesticide policy.

Leys Bowls Green

Due to the dissatisfaction raised by Witney Town Bowls Club with the Council's maintenance of the bowls green, members agreed to use contractors to renovate the green at the Leys in 2024. A professional contractor was commissioned to complete the renovations, and the programme of works the contractor followed was identical to that of the council renovation programme. Despite this, the two greens produced vastly different results.

After a season-long review, it was found that the micron size of the sand was not fine enough for a bowls green. Additionally, the renovations took place far too late in the year, the sand did not work into the root zone for the spring because of the frost. This has meant the council maintenance team has been working extensively to recover the green from these mistakes. The green is now in a better condition after the 2025 renovation into the 2026 season; however, the work completed by the contractors has set the green back rather than improving it.

West Witney Bowls Green

West Witney Bowls green was renovated by the council maintenance team at season close in 2024. The quality of this renovation can't be reviewed until the green is in use for the 2025 season. Feedback from both clubs that use the green has been positive, with comments that visiting teams are also praising its quality. There were some localised dry patch issues which were addressed near the beginning of the season, but the record dry weather did eventually mean these were lost.

West Witney Cricket Square

Under the user agreement between Witney Swifts and the council, the Swifts volunteer team manage the match preparation, with the council undertaking the renovation and out-of-season maintenance. The club have not raised any issues with the square, and the square has been booked three times this year by visiting teams, of which Swifts supported with marking out creases for them.

Leys Cricket Square

Witney Swifts have indicated they plan to field a 3rd team for the 2026 cricket season. In anticipation of this, the square has been lightly renovated to ensure it is in a playable condition for 2026. If Witney Swifts can't field a 3rd team, it may be in the council's interest to encourage some level of friendly games on the field. Due to the health and safety concerns of the field, it would have to be at an amateur level. Two sight screens would have to be procured for this in the current financial year.

Football Pitches

The natural recovery of football pitches at West Witney and Burwell has quelled officers' concerns on their playability for the season. To further aid the recovery, the pitches have been fertilised to help boost the sward growth and strength going into the winter.

Leys Football Pitches

The Leys pitches, especially, were not in good condition for the 2025-26 season; this was not helped by the level of footfall over the field and the events schedule. Before the Witney Feast, large areas of bare earth were apparent, and the traction of the event's vehicles left the field in an unsuitable condition for football. Following this, a secondary renovation programme has been carried out, and the pitches have been re-mapped to utilise the better areas of grass.

This is the second time in 4 years that large areas of the Leys have been left unplayable, and a second renovation schedule has had to be carried out. Officers would like to review the events schedule to determine if a rest period for the field is required, so that a program of autumn renovation can be completed.

Grant Funding

Officers have approached the FA for potential grant funding on drainage solutions. The FA's approved contractor for the area has agreed to preliminary site meetings, but from initial discussion, it appears unlikely the pitches would be suitable for drainage. The cost of this drainage is estimated at £75,000 per 11a-side pitch, with the FA funding up to £25,000. In a situation where the field is suitable for draining, the council would need to allocate sufficient funding to meet the gap between the FA's grant funding.

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 the effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) Equality – Sports clubs can ensure equality by establishing clear policies, providing diversity training, making facilities accessible, promoting diverse leadership, and creating a culture of inclusivity where everyone feels safe and valued.
- b) Biodiversity - The application of selective weedkillers can be harmful to non-targeted species.
- c) Crime & Disorder – Sports equipment has been vandalised across all sites, including both cricket sightscreens and goalposts.

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.

There is a risk that, without the correct attention, the Leys recreation sward will continue to deteriorate year on year.

Financial implications

- 2 x Tildenet Fixed Net Screens – Portable – £2,880.00 inc. VAT (for the two)
- Budget code 4046 - sports equipment has a total underspend of £2,028.00 across The Leys, West Witney, and Burwell.
- The cost of this drainage is estimated at £75,000 per 11a-side pitch, with the FA funding up to £25,000.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and

1. Approve the purchase of two portable sight screens for Leys cricket use.
2. Consider options for friendly cricket games for officers to explore to ensure the Leys cricket square receives use in 2026.
3. To note the condition of the Leys football pitches and action taken to repair the ground.
4. To delegate to officers to review the events schedule to determine if a rest period for the field is required, so that a program of autumn renovation can be completed at The Leys.
5. Discuss if a budget needs to be allocated for potential pitch drainage solutions in the 2026-27 financial year.