
Agenda Item:	Sports Pitches
Meeting Date:	Monday, 7 September 2026
Contact Officer:	Operations Manager

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the Town Council's sports pitches, including their current condition, maintenance programmes and projects relating to sports facilities owned and maintained by the Council.

Current Situation

Football Pitch Maintenance

Annual maintenance of the Council's sports pitches has progressed as planned across The Leys, Burwell, West Witney and King George V sports grounds.

Following a prolonged period of hot and dry weather, the Council's pitches experienced some drought stress, including browning of the sward and some areas of thinning grass cover. Recent rainfall has resulted in a noticeable improvement in colour and growth, with the pitches responding positively and recovering for the football season.

Although the pitches remain suitable for use, Officers will use the forthcoming Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) inspection to assess any longer-term effects of the dry conditions and consider the resilience and future maintenance requirements of the pitches.

The STRI inspection is scheduled for 23 September 2026, slightly later than usual due to the exceptionally dry ground conditions experienced during the summer. The inspection will provide an independent assessment of pitch condition and recommendations for future maintenance and renovation programmes.

Windrush Place Sports Pitches

A pitch assessment commissioned by the consortium, following a request from Witney Town Council, found the Windrush Place pitches to be in good condition and fit for purpose. When the results were assessed against Sport England guidance, both pitches were found to meet all relevant Performance Quality Standards.

However, Officers raised concerns regarding thinning and patchy areas observed during a subsequent site visit. Following discussions, the consortium's maintenance contractor agreed to undertake the following programme of works:

1. Regular cutting: Continue regular cutting of the pitches until the end of November, using a combination of cut-and-collect and cut-and-drop methods.
2. Fertiliser applications: Supply and apply fertiliser through three applications. Two applications will cover the period from September to the end of November, with each application expected to remain effective for approximately six weeks. The third application will be more nitrogen-based, with the aim of promoting healthy, green and resilient turf ahead of handover.
3. Overseeding: Overseed both pitches when weather and ground conditions are conducive to strong seed germination and establishment, particularly following the drought conditions experienced during the summer.
4. Aeration: Undertake appropriate aeration to support stronger seed germination and encourage the development of the existing root system. This could include verti-draining or shock-waving.
5. Brushing and scarifying: Brush and/or scarify the surface to reduce the build-up of thatch and dead grass currently present within the upper profile of the pitches.
6. Detox grid drainage: Jet wash the drainage system beneath the detox grid to ensure that the drains have not been compromised.
7. Pitch line marking: Prior to handover, Kestrel will line mark both pitches so that they are ready for use.

Witney Town Council has also recommended, and is awaiting approval for, the following additional measures:

8. Irrigation and watering: Given the drought conditions experienced, a clear requirement should be included for irrigation to support the germination and establishment of the overseeding. Watering should be undertaken as required, taking account of weather and soil conditions rather than relying solely on rainfall. This will be particularly important immediately following overseeding.
9. Overseeding follow-up: The maintenance programme should include a follow-up assessment of seed germination and establishment. Any areas where seed has failed to establish should be reseeded before handover, or an agreed programme should be put in place for this work to continue following handover.

Football Season Meeting August 2026

All football clubs using the Council's facilities are invited to attend quarterly meetings to discuss successes, challenges, potential solutions and future opportunities. Two football clubs were represented at the August meeting. While Officers would welcome greater attendance, the meeting was nevertheless considered valuable and provided a useful opportunity to engage directly with clubs.

Overall feedback on the 2025/26 season was very positive, particularly in relation to pitch quality. The weekly pitch inspection system, including photographs and direct communication with clubs, was well received and will continue. Clubs considered pitch cancellations to have been reasonable and proportionate.

Two major events at The Leys will affect pitch availability during September:

- Circus: 2–6 September, affecting Pitch 4.
- Witney Feast: 13–15 September, with additional measures being implemented to minimise the risk of vehicle damage to the pitches.

The adult pitch at The Leys will not be available before 19 September and may not be playable until October, depending on the condition of the pitch following the events.

Further details of the meeting are included in **Appendix A**. The principal matters discussed are summarised below.

Pitch Configuration: With Spartan Rangers no longer requiring Newland, there may be an opportunity to create additional smaller pitches, subject to demand. Woodgreen School changing rooms may continue to be required, although parking and toilet provision remain areas requiring consideration.

Pitch Maintenance: An annual STRI inspection is planned for September to assess areas including compaction, weeds and root depth. The findings will help inform future maintenance requirements and programmes.

The Leys Changing Rooms: The refurbished changing rooms are being handed over to Witney Town Council, with bookings to be managed through the council's booking Service. Public toilets are also available. There are some concerns remain regarding reliable access to Courtside storage; however, the stated 8.00am opening time should assist clubs on match days.

Bookings: Spartan Rangers will continue to use King George V until the adult pitch at The Leys becomes available.

Vikings can continue with their existing block booking arrangements at The Leys but will review whether the current pitch configuration continues to meet their requirements. The Council is in the final stages of exploring online booking options.

Future Facilities and Development

Windrush Place: Two adult football pitches and a smaller enclosed training/play area are planned. Clubs have raised concerns regarding fair and transparent access under the

proposed trust arrangements. The Council's proposed oversight structure is intended to ensure appropriate community access to the facilities.

West Witney Clubhouse: Completion of the West Witney clubhouse is targeted for autumn 2026. There have been quality and contractor performance issues during the project; however, the project remains within budget.

The Leys Cricket Square: Consultation is continuing regarding the potential return of cricket to The Leys. If sufficient interest cannot be established, consideration could be given to converting the area into additional football pitches. This could provide greater flexibility for pitch rotation and maintenance.

Future 3G Pitch: Witney Town Council is scoping the planning requirements for a potential floodlit 3G artificial pitch at West Witney. While this would reduce some grass pitch provision, it would provide a year-round sporting facility. Specification and funding arrangements are currently being researched, including the requirement for a significant long-term maintenance fund.

Cricket & Football Seasons

The local football season runs from 1 September to 30 April, while the cricket season generally runs from 1 May to the first weekend of September.

The overlap between the end of the cricket season and the start of the football season continues to require careful management. Following Swifts Cricket Club's final home fixture on 5 September 2026, responsibility for management of the cricket square will revert to the Town Council.

Officers have worked closely with both Swifts Cricket Club and Tower Hill FC to coordinate the transition between the two seasons. This has included discussions regarding football pitch line marking and match-day arrangements to ensure both sports can be accommodated successfully.

Both clubs have been supportive of the proposed arrangements and have worked collaboratively to minimise potential conflicts.

Bowls Greens

Officers have worked closely with the three bowls clubs to support continuous improvement in the maintenance and renovation of the Council's bowls greens.

Maintenance schedules have been carefully coordinated to ensure sufficient time is available for green maintenance while minimising disruption to clubs' fixture programmes. Equipment and training requirements are also being kept under review to ensure that Council and club standards continue to be met.

Feedback from the clubs regarding the condition of the greens has been very positive, with particular appreciation expressed for the increased level of communication and the standard and performance of the greens.

Operatives who have played a key role in maintaining the Witney Town Bowls Club green at The Leys have been invited to attend the club's end-of-season social evening, providing members with an opportunity to express their sincere appreciation for their skilled, dedicated and hard-working efforts throughout the season.

Cricket Pitches

Although it was hoped that The Leys cricket wicket would be used during the 2026 season, no users have come forward to date. Officers have continued to engage with potential users and local cricket stakeholders regarding the future use of the facility. While discussions have taken place, no formal commitment has yet been received.

The cricket square is therefore currently being maintained at a reduced level, with the maintenance regime capable of being enhanced should a club or other user be identified in the future.

Officers are conducting their final review of the long-term future of The Leys cricket square, including how the facility can best support community use and contribute to the Council's wider sports pitch provision.

The start of the cricket season presented some challenges due to the refurbishment works at the West Witney clubhouse. Officers worked closely with the cricket club to identify practical solutions, including arranging and securing alternative venues for the club's first two fixtures.

As the season draws to a close, feedback received from Swifts Cricket Club has been very positive. The club has expressed its appreciation for the support provided by Council Officers and the grounds maintenance team throughout the season, particularly the helpful and collaborative approach taken when addressing ground maintenance and operational matters.

Basketball Courts

As part of the budget-setting process, the Council agreed to support improvements to basketball provision in Witney.

Officers have met with Witney Wolves Basketball Club (WWBC) to discuss its requirements for the hard court at King George's Field, as well as the club's longer-term aspirations for the court adjacent to Windrush Leisure Centre, which it has asked the Council to focus on.

Officers subsequently met with an Operational Manager from Oxfordshire County Council at the court adjacent to Windrush Leisure Centre. Further information has been requested and is awaited to clarify:

- Ownership and Council responsibility
- Licence or lease arrangements
- Funding and improvement works
- Maintenance and operational responsibilities
- Insurance, liability and safeguarding
- Long-term partnership and governance

Corporate Strategy

The Council's Strategic Plan 2025–29 sets out the Council's long-term priorities and direction, supporting its mission to 'make Witney a great place to live, work and visit.' This report contributes to the delivery of the following strategic pillar of the plan:

2. An Engaged & Supported Community

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 - Maintaining and operating good quality sports pitches has a positive effect by promoting inclusive access to recreation, physical activity and community participation for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities.
- b) Biodiversity - Good quality sports pitches have both positive and manageable biodiversity impacts. Well-managed green spaces contribute to urban green infrastructure, support soil health, and assist with surface water drainage.
- c) Crime & Disorder – Has a positive impact on crime and disorder by providing safe, accessible and structured recreational opportunities for residents, particularly young people.
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency - Green open spaces contribute to carbon capture, urban cooling and natural drainage, while supporting healthier local environments and encouraging outdoor physical activity.

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.

Failure to maintain and operate good quality sports pitches could result in deteriorating facilities, increased health and safety risks, reduced participation in sport and physical activity, and reputational damage to the Council. Poor quality or unavailable pitches may limit opportunities for local clubs and residents, negatively impacting community wellbeing and inclusion. Inadequate maintenance could also lead to higher long-term repair costs, loss of external funding opportunities, reduced income generation and increased complaints from users and stakeholders.

Social Value

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

The maintenance and operation of good quality sports pitches deliver social value by supporting community health, wellbeing and social cohesion. Accessible and well-maintained facilities provide opportunities for residents of all ages and backgrounds to participate in sport, recreation and organised community activities, helping to encourage active lifestyles, reduce social isolation and strengthen community engagement.

Financial implications

- The work on maintenance is funded from pre-defined budgets.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and updates.