

2026/27 Football Season Meeting Notes

Date: 18th August 2026

Time: 6:00pm

Location: The Corn Exchange Gallery Room, Market Square, Witney, OX28 6AB

Councillors:

Cllr Ruth Smith (Chair)

Cllr Joy Aitman, Chair of the Parks & Recreation Committee

Witney Town Council Staff Members:

Mark Lewis, Head of Estates and Operations

Hollie Battson, Reception & Bookings Administrator

Nicholas Brown, Operations Manager: apologies for absence

Football Teams Representatives:

Vikings FC: Mike Witcombe, Vice Chair

Tower Hill FC: DNA

Spartan Rangers FC: Alfie Saunders, Club Secretary

Royals: DNA

FC Mills: DNA

Meeting Opened: 6pm

Cllr Joy Aitman entered the room at 18:01

1. Welcome and Introductions

The meeting opened with introductions of the attendees. Alfie Saunders noted his 40-year tenure as the Club Secretary for Spartan Rangers Football Club, and Mike Witcombe introduced himself as representing the Vikings with 15 years of experience. Mark Lewis, the Head of Estates and Operations, Hollie, Receptionist & Bookings Administrator. Followed by introductions from Cllr Ruth Smith, and Cllr Joy Aitman, the Chair of the Parks and Recreation Committee.

Mark noted that the new Operations Manager, Nick Brown, was currently on holiday but would be building relationships with the clubs upon his return. He succeeds Angus Whitburn in the role of Operations Manager.

2. Notes from the Last Meeting – 4th November 2025

Nothing to note.

3. Updates of the last season 2025/26

Despite the wet conditions, there was good feedback overall. Mark shared positive feedback regarding pitch conditions from the previous season, specifically noting that a member of staff who plays for one of the local men's teams, considered Burwell Pitch the best in their league. The council's revised approach, initiated last year, involved weekly pitch inspections, with photos and assessments shared directly with club representatives. Rather than blanket cancellations due to inclement weather, this fostered a collaborative

and flexible process; coaches and managers were empowered to make nuanced decisions balancing play with pitch preservation. This system, credited for improving relations and match quality, is set to continue.

Alfie of Spartans commented to say that any cancellations that were made, were considered reasonable, and Mike used an example whereby there may be frost or ice late at night, that thaws quite quickly on a morning and wouldn't necessarily prevent a game from going ahead.

4. Updates for 2026/27

Mark commenced with the fact that two major events at The Leys are to take place in September and that this will affect pitch availability. A circus will occupy a corner near the Splash Pad on September 5th, taking out pitch four. The following weekend: Saturday 12th September, will see Witney Feast return for its annual visit. Mark expressed concerns about their vehicles encroaching on the football pitches and damaging the ground, as happened last year. However, to mitigate this, the council will use pigtail stakes and orange fencing to mark boundaries for the event organizers (the Wilsons). A damage deposit is in place, and pre- and post-event photos will be taken to ensure the grounds are respected.

The earliest the adult pitch at The Leys is expected to be playable from September 19th, depending on post-event conditions.

Mark proceeded to show the group a slide of the current pitch configuration at the Leys and did so for each ground at different points during the meeting.

With Spartans no longer needing to use Newland, it's possible that a couple of smaller pitches could be created instead. However, this will depend on the demand. Woodgreen School will still need to be contacted for changing room facilities. It was noted that whilst the school remains accommodating, the parking, and the lack of discrete toilet facilities near the pitch remain a minor issue.

5. Pitch conditions and maintenance update

An annual STRI inspection is scheduled for September to assess soil compaction, weed coverage, and root depth. This will help refine the maintenance plan going forward. It has not been possible to undertake this prior to the season commencing, due to the ongoing warm and dry conditions.

6. Completion of Leys Changing Rooms refurbishment

The WTC changing rooms at Courtside are being handed over to the council this month. Bookings for these new changing rooms are to be made through Hollie, as with the Burwell changing rooms. Public toilets are open to the public within the new building.

Storage Access: A concern was raised regarding the storage room at Courtside. It was reported by clubs that Courtside is providing storage as a favour, and access is currently restricted to when specific staff are present. Clubs reported they currently rely on a short-term favour-based system by Courtside, but access is inconsistent due to restricted opening hours and staff/keyholder availability. It was noted that published opening hours indicate access from 8am. This should help to mitigate any risk of equipment inaccessibility, especially on match days.

7. Bookings and Allocations, including the Leys Changing Rooms (online booking system)?

Alfie asks about the adult pitch at the Leys and was informed that availability, could be possible from 19th September. However, this will depend on the pitch condition after the Feast. So potentially, it could be an October start. The King George ground will be kept available from September for Spartan Rangers until they can go to the Leys.

Vikings will be able to continue to block book the rest of the Leys, as per last season. Mike to check with Steve Bott of Vikings, as to whether the current pitch configurations are sufficient, or whether any tweaks need to be made.

Online booking options are still being explored.

8. Communications

Mike of Vikings raised a query regarding Windrush Place. Ruth confirmed that it has not yet been handed over to Witney Town Council from West Oxfordshire District Council.

This development will include x2 adult pitches, and a play zone. Clubs voiced concern about fair access and transparency under new trust-based arrangements. The council recognized the importance of the community benefit and pledged oversight (with Joy to be on the trust board) to ensure openness and prevent facilities being monopolized. The remarkable growth of the Vikings and commitment to inclusive access for youth teams were acknowledged; the club's lack of a permanent base was noted, but hope remains as new facilities come online. Historic relations between clubs were acknowledged but it was agreed that future collaboration will be vital to maximise use of all town resources.

West Witney Clubhouse:

Completion is now targeted for this autumn however this is subject to the performance of the contractor. The project has faced quality issues and performance challenges with the contractor which is being managed by officers and consultants aligned with the formal contract in place.

Leys Cricket Square:

Consultation is ongoing regarding the return of cricket. If no interest is registered, the square may be reconfigured into additional football pitches. Mike notes that this would allow for better rotation if other pitches needed a rest.

Future Development and 3G Pitch Planning:

The council will be managing and delivering a 3G artificial turf pitch project at West Witney. Mark emphasised that while this will sacrifice some grass area, it will provide a year-round, floodlit facility. The team is currently researching specifications and building a fund for long-term maintenance costs, which are expected to be in the hundreds of thousands of pounds.

9. Next Steps and Actions

The participants agreed that meeting twice a season is the ideal frequency. The next meeting will be scheduled for January to address any mid-winter weather issues and to plan for the second half of the season in time for the Spring. Mark reiterated that the council wants active feedback throughout the season, not just during these formal meetings.