PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE

Agenda Item: Sports Pitches

Meeting Date: Monday, 2 November 2026

Contact Officer: Operations Manager

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on sports pitches and associated facilities, including the findings of the recent Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) advisory review, the future of the cricket square at The Leys Recreation Ground and progress towards the operational handover of the changing facilities at the Courtside Hub.

Background

On 23 September 2026, the Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) undertook an advisory review of the Council's principal sports facilities, including West Witney Sports Ground, The Leys Recreation Ground, Windrush Place, Burwell Queen Elizabeth II Field and King George V Playing Field.

The review considered football pitches, bowling greens, cricket facilities, maintenance practices, machinery provision and future investment priorities. A copy of the full STRI Advisory Review Report is attached as **Appendix A.**

Members will also recall that at the meeting held on 7 September 2026, the Committee considered the future of the cricket square at The Leys Recreation Ground and recommended that, subject to no suitable expression of interest being received, Officers be authorised to discontinue the cricket square and reconfigure the area for football and wider recreational use.

Current Situation

The STRI report was generally very positive regarding the condition and maintenance of the Council's sports facilities. The review concluded that the Council's sports facilities compare favourably with similar local authorities and rank among the best encountered by the assessor highlighting a number of strengths within the existing maintenance regime.

The bowling greens are performing exceptionally well, demonstrating excellent grass cover, strong root development, and impressive resilience throughout what has been a particularly demanding summer. They were highlighted as some of the best examples seen by the assessor at this stage of the season. Current maintenance practices are delivering excellent results, with only minor refinements recommended, including additional aeration in rink ends and perimeter areas, together with ongoing management of worm casting and tree root

intrusion. Annual organic matter testing would further support future renovation planning and continued high standards.

The report recognised the high standard of existing sports grounds management and highlighted opportunities to further strengthen maintenance recording, inspection regimes and long-term sports facility planning. Officers consider these recommendations align closely with work already being undertaken to enhance and formalise a structured, evidence-based approach to managing the Council's sports facilities.

The report identified The Leys Recreation Ground as the most challenging sports site within the Council's portfolio due to the competing demands of organised sport, community events, casual recreation and significant pedestrian use. Officers are actively considering a range of irrigation solutions to enhance the resilience of the grounds and maintain playing surface quality during increasingly hot and dry summer conditions.

As part of the review, STRI was specifically requested to assess the future of the cricket square at The Leys. The report notes that cricket demand at the site appears limited, that the square continues to require ongoing maintenance expenditure and that consideration should be given to incorporating the area into football provision where football demand exceeds cricket demand.

The expression of interest process regarding future cricket use remains ongoing and the deadline for submissions has been extended to 15 November 2026. Once the process has concluded, Officers will review any submissions received and determine the most appropriate way forward, having regard to the Committee's previous resolution and the findings of the STRI review.

Following completion of the Courtside Hub project, Officers continue to work with Courtside, sports clubs and other stakeholders to facilitate the operational handover of the changing facilities. Work remains ongoing to finalise documentation, maintenance arrangements, operational responsibilities and access arrangements. The changing facilities are not yet operational, and a further update will be provided once the handover process has been completed.

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 towards:

Protect and Enhance our Environment and Community Assets

through the effective management and long-term sustainability of the Council's sports and recreation facilities.

Impact Assessments

a) Equality - Well-maintained sports facilities support inclusive access to recreation and sporting opportunities.
b) Biodiversity - The report encourages sustainable grounds maintenance practices and consideration of long-term site management.
c) Crime & Disorder - No direct implications arising from this report.
d) Environment & Climate Emergency - The STRI report highlights the importance of drought resilience, soil health and sustainable maintenance practices.

Risk

Failure to maintain sports facilities appropriately could impact user satisfaction, playing quality and the long-term sustainability of Council assets.

The STRI review provides independent professional advice which will assist Officers in prioritising future maintenance, investment and risk management activities.

Social Value

The Council's sports facilities provide significant health, wellbeing and recreational benefits for residents, sports clubs and community groups. Continued investment in the management of these facilities supports wider community participation and physical activity.

Financial Implications

The STRI review has been completed within approved budgets.

Officers will review the report's recommendations and implement operational improvements where appropriate within existing delegated authority and approved budgets. Any proposals requiring additional expenditure or changes to approved budgets will be brought forward for Member consideration through the Council's normal budget-setting and committee processes.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

1. Note the report.
2. Note the findings of the Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) Advisory Review.
3. Note the update regarding The Leys Recreation Ground cricket square.
4. Note the progress towards the operational handover of the Courtside Hub changing facilities.