

**Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee**  
**21 July 2022**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>Future of Parks Tennis - Acceptance of grant from Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) and implementation and procurement of the future operating model</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>Director of Neighbourhood Services</b>

**REPORT SUMMARY**

This report provides Committee with the Lawn Tennis Association's (LTA) capital grant funding proposal for tennis court improvement works across Wirral, including operating models for the future management and maintenance of the courts.

It will also provide an overview of tennis provision across the Council's parks and open spaces and propose a sustainable way forward to tennis provision across Wirral's Parks and Open Spaces in the future.

Improvement to the environment and opportunities within parks and open spaces is a core strand of Wirral's Sport and Physical Activity Strategy as seen in Appendix 1.

This work is aligned to the priorities of the Wirral Plan 2026 specifically active and healthy lives, and safe and pleasant communities.

This report is a key decision as it affects more than two Wards within the Borough.

**RECOMMENDATION/S**

The Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee is recommended to authorize the Director of Neighbourhoods to:

1. Accept the grant funding from the Lawn Tennis Association in the sum of £300,000 to enable tennis court improvement for the Council parks courts.
2. Implement the operating model as set out in paragraph 3.27 of the report and procure an operator.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1.1 To improve the quality of parks tennis courts across the borough.
- 1.2 To increase participation and playing opportunity to all.
- 1.3 To provide a sufficient income at each site which will contribute significantly to covering operating costs and ensuring self-sustainability.
- 1.4 To provide a tennis delivery operating model that will enable a range of LTA endorsed products and programmed activity to be run across park sites.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 Not to progress with grant funding. This option was discounted due to the fact that a financially sustainable model was presented to offer the Council the ability to upgrade the majority of its Park Tennis courts with grant funding. The existing ongoing maintenance costs and suggested sinking fund financial provision cannot be met by existing revenue budgets.
- 2.2 Develop a partial model - Progress with a smaller number of sites. This was ruled out due to the Council wanting to provide a quality tennis offer across most sites due to the identified market penetration of 13,225 residents for the tennis park sites. (Appendix 2) This would also not bring in the income needed to provide a sustainable parks tennis programme model for the future.
- 2.3 Consider an inhouse delivery model – The financial and operational risks are reduced by using a third-party operator. Over year's the Council's sports development team funding has been cut and there is not the expertise within the Council to drive this project forward.

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 3.1 In October 2021 the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the LTA announced a funding pot of £28million that will see public park tennis courts in very poor or unplayable condition brought back into life for the benefit of the community. Of this total sum, grant funding of £300k is available to Wirral Council to improve park courts across the Borough.
- 3.2 This new tennis delivery model for parks will increase tennis participation, improve the quality of more park courts across the borough and drive an income which contributes significantly to ensuring self-sustainability and significantly less reliance on capital and revenue investment from reducing Council budgets.
- 3.3 The model is insight led by the LTA and has been tested and adopted by Local Authorities of similar size and case studies (Appendix 3) have been created.

- 3.4 The LTA capital investment will be used to install a gate entry system at all 12 identified sites. Of those 12 sites, 9 will undergo court upgrade work. Detailed information of capital works is included in appendix 2.
- 3.5 Whitfield Common courts currently fall outside of the criteria due to the high Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) result; low penetration rate and high estimated cost of capital refurbishment works. A request from the Council to the LTA for this site to be considered has been placed with the decision not yet available at this time.
- 3.6 The LTA objectives for Wirral's Parks Tennis are:
- To achieve an operating model that protects Wirral parks tennis courts for the future
  - For Wirral residents to be provided with an affordable and accessible tennis option for tennis.
  - For programming and activation opportunities to engage with local communities.
  - For those with financial barriers to have an opportunity to access free tennis (court bookings and programmes)
  - To improve the tennis courts currently in the poorest playable condition.
- 3.7 The full scope includes capital works investment focusing on improving courts that are in the worst condition (unplayable, poor), activation through accessibility and targeted programmes, providing support to communities in IMD areas 1-5 and enabling a smooth journey to court via a gate access system (with viability confirmed by insight).
- 3.8 The full project must be completed by April 2024.
- 3.9 The LTA prioritised parks where there is a penetration of over 1,000 and considered business cases for those below e.g., factors such as being coastal, lack of other facilities in the area spreading the catchment etc.
- 3.10 Providing quality local environments for residents to be more active in their local area is an objective within Wirral's Sport and Physical Activity Strategy. This, partnered with informal opportunities to be active will contribute to reducing the health inequalities seen within the borough and documented within the Wirral Plan.
- 3.11 Grant funding of c£300k is available to Wirral Council from the DCMS and LTA's Park Improvement Programme. This funding is part of total pot of £28million that will see public park tennis courts in very poor or unplayable condition brought back into life for the benefit of the community.
- 3.12 Over the last 3 years the Council in partnership with the LTA have implemented several interventions to increase participation and provide accessible and affordable tennis at a local level. Over this period the Council has seen significant increases in players participating in parks having created free and affordable tennis activities, introduced accessible technology to improve the customer journey through online booking system and established databases to market further opportunities and track usage.
- 3.13 Data from ClubSpark, the online booking system indicates that 6,918 court hours have been booked in the last 12 months, across 12 sites and 36 tennis courts.

- 3.14 There are several challenges facing the Council's current parks tennis provision. Currently the only programmed tennis activity within the parks is only taking place when grant funding support from the LTA is available. Ad-Hoc tennis play and both authorised and unauthorised coaching does take place at a number of sites.
- 3.15 Over the previous 10 years the council has invested £256,000 in upgrading the park tennis courts. The previous 5 years of maintenance costs amount to £46,640. On average approximately £9,328pa is spent on maintenance and repair and all major court refurbishment works are funded from the Council's capital programme and Section 106 funding.
- 3.16 Most park tennis courts are not suitable for high quality tennis play and with continued budget pressures the long-term future of many of the park tennis courts is at risk.
- 3.17 Data and insight provided by the LTA identifies an opportunity to develop a sustainable model for tennis across the park's estate.
- 3.18 There are several parks showing high levels of latent demand. The population demographic with an interest in playing tennis within a 10-minute drive time can be seen in appendix 2.
- 3.19 As part of the DCMS and LTA grant funding programme to invest in park tennis courts, there is the following opportunity available to the Council.
- **£300,000** of grant funding to provide gate access systems and capital court and fencing works to bring courts to a 'good' standard.
  - There is an opportunity to drive income from sites to fund the ongoing maintenance and sinking fund through a new operating model.
  - There is an opportunity to provide free and accessible tennis at each of the sites.

There would be an opportunity to attract a Tennis Operator who will have an expertise that will drive participation and connect to the programme of activities at the indoor tennis centre.

3.20 **Operating Models** - Park operating models are typically defined as:

- National Tennis Operator led – an outsourced model to oversee all delivery, managed by contract
  - Local Tennis Operator led – an outsourced model to oversee all delivery, managed by contract
  - LA led with Tennis Operator support – partly outsourced specific delivery strands, e.g. just coaching
  - LA led - resourcing the management of the delivery model to drive sustainability, coaching, local links, marketing, SLA management etc
- 3.21 The LTA have seen an increased number of park operators establish 'Park Tennis Delivery models' across area wide networks as Local Authorities have outsourced the management and responsibility to drive sinking fund income and manage the customer journey and experience. In many cases this model connects to a community hub tennis venue to make it more viable and there needs to be a scalable opportunity across a network of venues.

- 3.22 The LTA is establishing agreements to support a growing number of operators across the country. There are many different types of local agreements to reflect the desire to maintain local coaches, level of control and pricing structures.
- 3.23 The main benefits of an operator model to a Local Authority is expertise being engaged, alongside technology support and time spent in driving users and income, along with offering potential for investment.
- 3.24 Across the country there are an increased number of park operators establishing 'Park Tennis Delivery models' across borough and city-wide networks as Local Authorities. The LTA is currently establishing agreements to support 10 operators across the country.
- 3.25 Wirral Council has a significant opportunity to attract an operator and align with the most recent developments at the Wirral Tennis and Sports Centre, where the facility can act at the community hub for the operator. To have a consistent approach in the delivery of tennis across the borough the same operator delivering all activity is preferable.
- 3.26 There are three model options considered are stated below and full details can be found in appendix 4:

Option 1 - All sites Free of Charge

Option 2 - IMD 6-10 subsidising IMD 1-5 park sites

Option 3 - All sites charging

- 3.27 The preferred option is option 3 with a local operator led model due to least financial risk to the Council and the evidence provided demonstrating that a flexible charging model and gate access system are not a barrier to participation. It is recommended that that one local operator undertake the tennis activity for the Council.
- 3.28 **LTA IT Management System – ClubSpark, LTA Play and Gate Access System**  
The ClubSpark online booking system was introduced to all Wirral Park tennis courts in Spring 2016 and the proposal is to continue with this system and roll out further across the estate. Full details of ClubSpark can be found in appendix 5 from the LTA – Parks Tennis, making your courts work for you.
- 3.30 Gate Access Systems will be introduced to the courts as insight from the LTA has shown that the main barriers to participation on parks courts are not knowing where the closest courts are, not knowing how to book or play on the courts, not knowing the condition of the court surface and park tennis players say that they don't play more due to the quality of the courts.
- 3.31 The LTA also know that only 16% of tennis players are satisfied with the ability and opportunity to book courts. Just 10% of participants are satisfied with the customer services received at their park tennis facility and 69% of park players identify as either a beginner or improver level.
- 3.32 When questioned about an online booking and gate access system. 78% of players in clubs and parks said it was a 'good' or 'great idea'. Nearly half of all park's players said

it would help them play more often. 80% of players in parks said it would make getting on court easier and 87% are satisfied with the online booking system.

- 3.33 In 2020, sites with gate access installations attracted 65,751 unique players to make bookings that led to 791, 226 courts being booked and generated over £1.5million pounds of income. By making booking made via a digital device then the customer experience is enhanced making it easier to get more people playing tennis. The system has the ability to take income for both pay and play and coaching fees, by making the courts work harder for the Council, meaning a more sustainable operation.
- 3.34 The Gate Access System will use SmartAccess Lite. SmartAccess Lite requires no power to the site making gate access a possibility in remote venues and saves upfront the cost of bringing power courtside. The SmartAccess Lite system require venues to buy batches of codes (costing 15 pence each upfront), every time a court is booked, one code is used.
- 3.35 The SmartAccess Lite system utilises an algorithm linked to dates and times, which ClubSpark also uses, issuing a code to allow entry to the courts at the time booked. The system will also link with the K3 Connect app via a mobile phone, allowing administrators to alter many functions of the system, and to add codes for maintenance/operating teams.
- 3.36 The system is controlled via a mobile phone app, and allows for management, coach and maintenance codes to be issues, as well as a 'Code-Free' option which allows the courts to not require a code at pre-set times of the day/week – great for offering a mix of paid for and free to use court time if desired. Those turning up with no prior knowledge of the new system can sign up via a mobile phone and access the court in under 1 minute.
- 3.37 **Existing Wirral Tennis Parks Programmes** - Tennis For Free is currently in operation at Birkenhead Park, Marine Drive Park and more recently New Ferry Park. Due to Covid impact there has been a reduced format for the programme, however it offers a weekly supervised free tennis opportunity with a qualified tennis coach and where equipment is provided.
- 3.38 Wirral Parks Local Tennis League provides the opportunity for players to compete locally in a park setting, against players of a similar ability.
- 3.27 The health and wellbeing of Wirral will be a key factor in its ongoing success. The ambition is to ensure that all Wirral residents have the opportunity, environment and support they need to lead active, healthy, and happier lives, and to make physical activity an everyday natural choice.
- 3.28 If the recommendations are agreed, then a longer-term plan for creating better health and social outcomes for the residents of Wirral through tennis will be developed. This will be a cocreated piece of work with the Council, LTA, clubs, partner organisations and the local communities.

## **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The capital investment at the 12 sites will be financed by the LTA.

- 4.2 Projected income figures for the preferred operating model would see the Parks Tennis Courts becoming financial sustainable through the proposed income generation options through a local tennis operator. No longer relying on Council revenue funding of approximately £9,300 per year.
- 4.3 Projected fees and charges are subject to change as these are only estimated at this stage as more detailed discussions with operators will need to take place once members approval has been granted.

## **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The Council will need to agree to the LTA terms and condition of the grant.

## **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

- 6.1 The resource implications would require a member of staff already in post to manage the operator contract and project manage the capital works alongside the LTA.

## **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

- 7.1 There is a risk that the operator may not be able to generate the income levels required to run a sustainable operation. The level of demand and the fees and charges will have to be monitored and adjusted accordingly where possible to mitigate the risk.
- 7.2 Failure to attract an operator would result in the grant not being able to be accepted and a new operating model would need to be investigated.

## **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

- 8.1 There have been numerous meetings with the LTA to discuss the capital investment and how Wirral can improve our tennis offer in the future utilising the operating and income.
- 8.2 Further consultation will be required with Friends Groups and court users as the projects are implemented.

## **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 This project is designed to increase participation and uptake from those target groups set out in the Sport and Physical Activity Strategy.
- 9.2 As set out under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality duty (PSED), an equalities impact assessment was carried out during the development of the strategy.

Park Tennis Courts were reviewed as part of the Sport and Physical Activity Strategy Equality Impact Assessment and this report makes no change to it. It is available at the following link, <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>.

## 10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The LTA have published an Environmental Sustainability Plan (appendix 6) setting out their ambition to secure a lasting future for tennis through positive action on climate change and leadership in sustainability.
- 10.2 In their role as national governing body, they have a commitment to support the wider tennis community become more environmentally sustainable.
- 10.3 The Parks Tennis programme is designed for local people to be able to access local facilities, having quality parks courts spread across the Borough will in turn reduce the need for people to travel by car to their nearest playing opportunity.
- 10.4 In reference to the Council's Environment and Climate Emergency Policy the use of online booking systems to oversee court usage will reduce unnecessary travel through planning ahead.

## 11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Working in partnership with a local operator to deliver the tennis programme will provide local people with jobs.

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### APPENDICES

- 1. [Creating an Active Wirral](#), a Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Wirral 2026
- 2. Wirral Park Tennis Courts information, associated improvements and penetration numbers.
- 3. Parks Tennis Investment Case Studies, Lawn Tennis Association
- 4. Operating Model Appraisal
- 5. [LTA – Parks Tennis, making your courts work for you](#). Lawn Tennis Association
- 6. [LTA Environmental Sustainability Plan](#), Lawn Tennis Association

### BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 1. [Sport and Physical Activity Strategy Public Consultation Report](#)

### SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date



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