

Community Tennis Update

Community Services Committee Thursday, 17 March 2022

Report of: Alison Boote – Executive Head of Communities

Purpose: For decision

Publication status: Open

Wards affected: Queens Park and Whyteleafe Wards in respect of the proposed application for Department of Culture Media and Sport ('DCMS') funding and all other Wards, either in respect of specific sites where the Council owns tennis courts or where residents in adjacent Wards would equally benefit from improvements to the facilities.

Executive summary:

This is an update on the report brought to Committee on 9th March 2021.

The Council's public tennis courts are currently free to use. Tennis can be played by people of all ages, all backgrounds and all levels of fitness and is known to have benefits for physical and mental health and wellbeing.

The Council does not actively promote its public tennis facilities and has no way of measuring how much our public tennis courts are used nor by whom. The Council receives no income from these facilities yet incurs costs in maintaining them.

This report updates Members on recent activities and potential funding possibilities announced by Department of Culture Media and Sport ('DCMS'). The report asks for Committee approval to apply for this funding to take forward improvements to Queens Park, Caterham and Whyteleafe Recreation Ground.

This report supports the Council's priority of:

Creating the homes, infrastructure and environment we need

Building a better Council

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Recommendation to Committee:

That progress be noted and the Executive Head of Communities be authorised to:

- (i) apply for DCMS funding to seek improvements to the condition of the courts and access to play at Whyteleafe Recreation Ground and Queens Park, Caterham, including the operation of a nil fee booking model for general play, but to also generate income through charging for professional coaching; and
- (ii) keep under review the potential to charge for play at some peak times.

Reason for recommendation:

To promote greater participation in park tennis through marketing, technology and enhancements to facilities

Introduction and background

1. Members will note that a previous report was received by this Committee on 9th March 2021 at which recommendations for the future of community tennis were deferred pending further consultation.
2. Members had expressed reservations about charging for court access, but were in favour of exploring options to improve access for grass roots tennis.
3. The Council currently provides public tennis courts at Queens Park, Caterham; Whyteleafe Park; Broadbridge Lane, Smallfield; and Talbot Road, Lingfield.
4. The Council also leases courts to independent tennis clubs / sports associations at Manor Park, Caterham; Dormansland Recreation Ground; Mill Lane, Hurst Green; and Oak Farm Recreation Ground, Felbridge. The Council is responsible for most of the costs of maintaining these facilities, utilising parks and open spaces budgets.
5. The Council recognises the advantages of regular and appropriate exercise and outdoor activity in improving health and wellbeing. Our parks and open spaces have a hugely important role to play. Any income generated through changes to our delivery of tennis would be used toward the cost of maintenance and to support community groups who use our parks and open spaces.

Government Funding Announcement

6. DCMS and the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) announced a £30 million funding package on 2nd October 2021. This national package, which has committed £21.9 million from the Government and £8.4 million from the Lawn Tennis Association, aims to revive over 4,500 public courts, including those in a poor or unplayable condition at more than 1,500 venues.
7. Initial applications are invited in the form of an initial business case to the LTA and agreed by a joint funding panel. The panel are particularly focused on improving tennis facilities in public parks through improving playability (e.g. resurfacing and other repairs), access technology and encouraging participation at grass roots level.
8. Courts that have mixed uses, e.g. Multi-Use Games Areas or 'MUGAs', as at Talbot Road, or are not fully open to the public (e.g. operated by tennis clubs) are not eligible for this funding. Eligible courts must be available for public tennis only.
9. Specialist technical assessors will make individual recommendations for improving each site, which will then be discussed and agreed with the local authority. Assistance and guidance will also be available for consulting with the public. Contractors will then be appointed through a framework agreed by the LTA and DCMS. Management of works will be supported by the LTA in partnership with local authorities.

Accessibility Options

10. There has been much discussion about accessibility of our tennis courts. This has focussed on gate entry systems and charging. A major factor in the equation is achieving a balance between informal play on demand opportunities and those seeking certainty that courts will be available at the time that they arrive to play.
11. Within the previous report, Officers explored the LTA 'Spark' platform in detail, which provides gated access and booking in advance, with the ability to charge for access as appropriate. Concerns were raised in March 2021 that charges may restrict access for more casual players or those on low incomes.
12. Therefore, the preferred option is to make an application to the new DCMS fund that will seek to improve the condition of the courts and access to play at both Whyteleafe Recreation Ground and Queens Park, Caterham. This will include operating a nil fee booking model for general play, but to also generate income through charging for professional coaching. It is recommended that the potential to charge for play at some peak times be kept under review.

13. Officers recommend that this option is explored more fully with the LTA through this funding opportunity so that a mixture of 'open' and bookable times are made available. It may also be possible to provide both systems on a site, e.g. bookable courts adjacent to open courts that are accessible for tennis and other mixed activities.
14. The availability of bookable courts will make it easier to provide partnerships with grass roots coaches that can provide facilities for young people and those on low incomes to explore the sport. Other coaching options could also be made available that would bring an amount of income into the council.

Other Court Refurbishments and Support for Tenant Clubs

15. Officers are arranging essential repairs and maintenance at the following clubs:
 - Oak Farm Recreation Ground, Felbridge
 - Dormansland Recreation Ground
 - Whyteleafe Recreation Ground (MUGA)
 - Talbot Road Recreation Ground, Lingfield
 - Broadbridge Lane Recreation Ground, Smallfield (MUGA)
 - Hurst Green Tennis Club, Mill Lane
16. The tennis clubs that operate on premises leased from the Council are small in size and have a strong local focus. These clubs also offer junior and senior coaching opportunities, that support access to the sport within their local communities. The Council supports these clubs by way of favourable lease terms, including very low or nil rent achieved through subsidies.
17. Officers are currently in the process of negotiating a new lease with Caterham & Whyteleafe Tennis Club at Manor Park, as the current lease expires on 31st March 2022.

Key implications

Comments of the Chief Finance Officer

Exploring alternative sources of funding to support our discretionary services enables us to divert general funds for other priorities.

Should a bid be successful, the business case needs to clarify whether the investment is for capital and / or revenue funding – i.e. refurbishing the courts and any day-to-day on-going operational support for what duration.

Comments of the Head of Legal Services

The Council has a statutory obligation and general duty of care to ensure facilities under our ownership are of acceptable quality and are safe for community engagement. In order to continue to provide tennis facilities within the District, the Council will need to invest in the facilities to effectively manage its assets.

Pursuing a funding bid represents a cost-effective way of securing investment in its assets. Working to secure a long-term partner on some of the sites will also help to generate additional community investment and usage.

Should a bid be successful, the Council will have to agree to any terms required in accepting the bid.

Equality

We will explore accessibility for wheelchair users within this project. We will also work in partnership with the LTA, charities, tennis coaches, sports clubs and the Health & Wellbeing Board to explore potential methods for improving access to disadvantaged groups.

Climate change

There are no significant environmental / sustainability implications associated with this report.

Appendices

None

Background papers

None

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