

Agenda Item 8

For discussion: Floodlighting the tennis courts on the Mary Baily playing field

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Summary

As previously reported, Frome Selwood Tennis Club is asking the Council to support a project to install floodlights on the three community tennis courts on the Mary Baily playing field. This project would have an estimated cost between £50,000 and £60,000.

Since we look after the playing field - in conjunction with Fields in Trust – this project will need FTC’s formal approval and with this FTC would become a named partner on all the relevant paperwork, including funding and planning applications.

The project remains at a preliminary stage; naturally and necessarily so because we are yet to make a formal decision about whether to support it.

Even so, the tennis club has been successful in securing in principle match-funding for up to 50% of the project from Sport England. The club has also been granted £3,000 by the Somerset Lawn Tennis Association County Committee.

The project remains subject to further funding being secured – potentially from an interest free loan from the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA)

The project will also require planning permission.

At this stage then, the tennis club is formally seeking FTC’s approval and a commitment of support to progress the project further.

Background

This report follows up on a presentation at the Council meeting on 7 March 2018 and a report presented to Cllrs at the Council Matters meeting on 20 February 2019.

The main outcome from the Council meeting in March 2018 was that Cllrs agreed to ‘work with the tennis club to bring a project forward’.

The project – this one – was then presented to this committee in February 2019. The report presented at that meeting included the results of a consultation exercise intended to garner local views on the idea. Since only 13 people responded to the questionnaire – a poor return – the recommendation was for a second consultation in the hope that this would gather more comments, views and questions and, by virtue of more returns, be more representative and informative for Cllrs.

Background on tennis in Frome

NB. Much of this section is taken from the report presented in February 2019 on the basis that the context and the general situation remain the same.

Although the tennis courts are open to the public throughout the year, there are natural variations in court bookings and use, with typical variations by season, time of day and during the school holidays. Not surprisingly, the courts are at their busiest during the better weather and when it's lighter in the evenings. There is also very little to no use when it's too dark to play in the evenings all the way through from late Autumn into Spring.

Overlapping this, time pressures are one of the biggest barriers stopping people taking any form of exercise, with many people who work 9am to 5pm on weekdays becoming excluded from sport simply because courts and facilities aren't open at times to suit them. Installing floodlights would allow people to use the courts throughout the year (weather permitting).

The Council is ever-interested in supporting the town to realise opportunities for formal and informal sport and in the right circumstances is keen to develop, improve and build facilities to do this. A perfect example of this was working with the tennis club to relocate the courts to Mary Baily.

As such – at least in terms of opportunity and participation - it seems a natural fit to support the tennis club in this project. The prospect of extended (gained) hours will also give FTC staff and the tennis club greater flexibility to look at offering more free tennis and more free coaching on the courts.

However, there are a variety of things to be considered here:

1. Budgets and grants

FTC doesn't have a budget or reserve funds identified in the current financial year to match-fund this project. Of course, Cllrs could decide to allocate some of the General Reserve and/or re-allocate existing Earmarked Reserves to support this project in the current financial year.

In addition to securing an in-principle grant from Sport England, the tennis club is exploring other ways of funding the project.

If the project goes ahead and some of the funding comes from an interest free loan from the LTA, FTC may need to be the named recipient of this loan. If this happens, Cllrs might then want to consider whether FTC re-pays the loan (the alternative being that FTC makes the loan repayments on behalf of the tennis club and then invoices the tennis club for these payments).

2. Staff resource

At this stage, it's expected that the tennis club will reflect the costs of all the professional services in their funding bids, including fees for a technical consultant and project management costs.

As such, FTC staff would not be responsible for overseeing the full details of the project, although it is reasonable to assume that staff would provide some time to review a draft planning application. It would then also be prudent and expected for at least one member of

staff to sit on the project team if and as this project progresses. This could be a stipulation of any further grant or loan funding offered to the project.

3. Opportunities – including public use, free tennis and free coaching

By virtue of the courts being available for longer, we may want to increase the number of hours in a week that the courts can be booked by the public for a reduced charge or for free, especially outside the peak season.

This means our support for the project could be conditional on increased public availability both for charged and free court use.

At the same time, there may be an opportunity to expand the scope of this project to include a hard-surfaced path that leads directly to the tennis courts, thereby providing better and more inclusive access to the courts.

4. Design

It's expected that various details relating to this project will be defined by the planning process, including the hours that the lights are on, the type of light and the type of bulb. The planning process could also define other design choices and could include planning conditions.

5. Landscape

Undoubtedly, floodlights will have a visual impact on the night sky and the landscape generally in this part of town. While this can be mitigated to an extent by lighting design, opinions about the impact will naturally be subjective. Depending on the Committee's view, this impact will need to be carefully weighed against the opportunity and the offer of more tennis in the town.

Consultations

As mentioned at the start of the report, the tennis club canvassed the thoughts and views of the neighbouring area in early 2019. Letters were hand-delivered to approximately 210 properties, including properties in Park Road, Longleat Court, Slipps Close, Butts Hill and Somerset Road. Ultimately, just 13 people had returned their views at this time and over half of these came from properties in Somerset Road.

Because of this return, a second consultation has just been completed. This time people had the opportunity to comment online, at the Town Hall and at a community event held by the tennis club. The second consultation was publicised by the club and by FTC.

First consultation: Of the 13 replies:

- 6 people were supportive of the idea
- 5 people had concerns and would likely oppose the project

Concerns highlighted the impact(s) on wildlife, light levels, increased traffic, increased noise and potential parking problems.

There were also 4 comments that the existing courts aren't used enough to merit the project.

Second consultation: Of the 119 replies (which mainly came from the tennis club open event):

- 49 responses from tennis club members - 70 from non-members
- 113 supporting the project (95%)
- 6 against or opposing the project (5%)
- 100 of the 119 felt that having floodlights would enable them to use the courts more
- 18 of the 119 said that having floodlights wouldn't help or encourage them to use the courts more

Opposing the project

Of the 6 people/households that do not support the project at this time, none are members of the tennis club and none felt that floodlights will encourage or enable them to use the courts more.

- 2 people focused their concerns on the potential light pollution and its impact on wildlife
- 2 people highlighted problems about parking in the area with concerns that these problems will be extended and exacerbated with more court availability in the winter
- There were also comments about the maintenance and upkeep of the existing courts being a greater priority than adding floodlights
- There was also a comment that offering more free tennis would be a better way to increase usage of the courts

Supporting the project

Comments from the 113 club members and non-club members who support and like the idea generally focused on the positives of supporting tennis and sport in general, and providing opportunities for people to be active and outdoors.

- There were lots of references made to winter play and a number of people felt that floodlights would benefit the community as well as the club and would enable children and families in particular to be more active
- Other comments mentioned the potential secondary benefit of the whole area feeling safer after dark
- A number of people supporting the idea mentioned the impact on parking locally
- There were comments about completing the project carefully and using advanced lighting technology to minimise the impacts from the floodlights
- There were also questions about whether making the courts available for free more often would be a better way to encourage more play

Comments made at the Town Hall

A further 11 comments were made on Post-it notes when the project overview and drawings were on display in the Town Hall between 29 July and 15 August.

10 of these comments were in support of the project – for similar reasons to those summarised above.

The other comment questioned whether making the courts free and more accessible now would be a better way of encouraging more use.

Final remarks

It was a significant decision to build the three new tennis courts on Mary Baily.

The decision about whether to support floodlights is equally significant, perhaps even more so given the impact on the night sky and the landscape. This impact needs to be considered and weighed against the benefits of supporting the opportunity to play tennis in the town.

The second consultation recently completed has seen a greater number of people comment and offer their views. And as noted, the vast majority of those who returned responses are supportive of the project.

Points for discussion

Free tennis – and hire charges

- Floodlighting the courts would increase the number of playable hours for tennis on all three courts. In turn, this could mean greater opportunities for the courts to be made available for free.
- And on the basis that any additional hours have not been accounted for previously by the club or the Council - in theory at least - the gained hours could all be made available for free.
- This wouldn't necessarily be the ideal scenario, though – the times that the courts would need to be lit may not necessarily overlap the times that FTC and the club would most want the courts to be available for free. But having more hours to work with could lead to a review of the bookings, charges and timings across the entire year (including factoring in the gained hours).
- Although it's not as simple as just making the courts available for free all of the time; the income received from court bookings is there to create a sinking fund for the upkeep of the courts in the future.
- The supply and maintenance costs of running the lights themselves will also need to be considered.

NB. The existing booking fee is £5 per court per hour (noting that this cost can be and is likely to be shared between the players playing).

Funding

- Although there isn't any funding identified or available in the current financial year, if the decision taken is to support the project for its merits, then Cllrs may also want to consider whether to support the project financially.
- This would clearly show the Council's support and potentially make it easier for the tennis club to apply for further funding.
- Although projects and partner funding to improve sports facilities aren't guaranteed, it's notable that the tennis club has in-principle agreement for the project and 50% of the total funding from Sport England already, plus a further £3,000 to commit.

Sports facilities

- The project would obviously see an investment in the sports facilities available in the town; in this instance, exclusively for tennis.
- Supporting the town's sports clubs to realise opportunities is the model identified and supported by the Council, especially where and when those clubs have invested time in scoping and designing the project(s) and secured things like permissions and funding.

- And the second consultation completed by the tennis club suggests both interest in the idea and very few people being opposed to the project.

Local impact

- There will be an impact on the landscape in this part of town and this will need to be weighed in the discussion.
- There is an expectation that the planning process and any granted planning permission will define elements of the project and will give people a further opportunity to comment on the project.
- There were a number of comments made in the second consultation relating to local parking issues and concerns that these existing parking problems will be exacerbated by having the courts available more of the time, more of the year.