

Committee Report

Off Season Use of Sports Fields

Date: 4th Sept 2025

To: Leisure & Recreation Committee

From: Andrew Briggs – Ops Manager

Subject: Unauthorised use of sports pitches during off season

Council Priority: Protect & Improve our Environment

1. Purpose of the Report

To inform the committee of increased unauthorised organised sports use at Council managed Rec grounds, assess the impact on pitch conditions and site management, and seek support for a strategy to address the issue through communication, regulation, and improved enforcement.

2. Background

Seven Fields Recreation Ground is a publicly accessible open space managed by the Parish Council. While informal public access is permitted, any organised activity, including football training, matches, or coaching, must be booked through the Parish Office, with a corresponding booking fee.

Under the Local Government Act 1972 and Open Spaces Act 1906, the Council retains the right to regulate the use of recreational land, including imposing restrictions and requiring bookings for structured use.

Recently, it has come to light through public observation and direct communication from clubs that numerous football teams (adult and youth) are using Council sites regularly for training without prior booking or permission. This includes clubs not currently registered to use the facility for the 2025/26 season.

3. Current Issues Identified

- High volume of non booked training sessions, some with equipment and multiple teams present at the same time (6 - 9pm reportedly sees 6 - 8 teams using the space).
- Uneven compliance, with some clubs (e.g. Great Western FC) following booking procedures while others do not, leading to issues of fairness.
- Significant pitch deterioration, made worse by extreme weather conditions (heat stress, heavy rainfall), making maintenance and recovery more difficult during the offseason.
- Clashes with scheduled works and events, as off season pitch maintenance and local summer events require clear access planning.
- Risk of liability to the Council should injuries or damage occur during unregulated use.

4. Current Condition of the Grounds

Due to extreme weather patterns during the summer months, including prolonged dry spells followed by intense rainfall, ground conditions at Seven Fields are currently very poor. The pitches are struggling to recover, and increased unauthorised usage is placing further pressure on already stressed turf, compounding damage before the official season begins.

5. Actions Taken to Date

- Direct communication with clubs found to be using the site without bookings.
- Circulation of a reminder through affiliated football leagues regarding the need for formal booking of all organised activity.
- Clarification of the Council's right to regulate use of the space under local authority legislation.
- Ongoing observation and informal logging of site usage.

6. Recommendations for Consideration

The Committee is asked to consider and support the following measures:

1. Issue a clear public message (website, social media, local noticeboards) stating that all organised sports activity must be booked in advance through the Parish Office ahead of the 26/27 closed season.
2. Install prominent signage at all site entrances and near playing areas outlining booking requirements and stating that organised activity without authorisation is not permitted (approx. cost £6/800)
3. Send letter to local leagues reminding them of procedures and reinforcing expectations.
4. Explore limited offering on partial sections of site to reduce wear and allow for legitimate use (mark sections during off season).
5. Maintain a weekly log of usage and bookings to monitor non booked activity and identify repeat offenders for further action.

7. Conclusion

The increasing unauthorised use for organised football activities, combined with poor weather conditions and overstretched maintenance, poses a real risk to the long term quality and sustainability of the recreation ground. While we are committed to keeping the site open and accessible to the public, we must ensure organised users follow proper procedures.

Support from the Committee will help ensure fair, safe, and responsible use of the facility, backed by clear communication and appropriate enforcement.

Recommendation:

That the Committee supports the above measures to regulate organised use of its managed Rec spaces to protect pitch quality going forward.