

Four Marks Parish Council – Open Spaces Committee

Date - 02/03/25

Supporting document for the OS meeting on 05th March 2025 - Item 5.3

The use of the Cricket Field for dual use with 9x9 Football and other activities.

Background

In September 2024 OS meeting, after a lot of discussion over previous weeks, it was voted unanimously that available space at the Four Marks recreation ground would be priorities in the following way:

1. The original Rec field will be prioritised for football with the existing 11x11 full size pitch and the practice pitch (9x9) adjacent to the Scout Hut. Dog walking would be allowed, but only 'on the lead' and only providing that the owners cleaned up after the dog. New and additional signage was agreed to be provided to inform dog walkers.
2. The Cricket Ground/pitch will be prioritised for any future Cricket, Archery and other activities as requested and agreed with the OS Committee. This has included the Firework show last November. It was also agreed that dog walkers will be allowed to walk their dogs 'off lead' but only if they clean up after the dog. New and additional signage was agreed to be provided to inform dog walkers.
3. The skate park and associated equipment would remain unaffected by this policy.

At the time it was felt that this was a good division of the available space, dedicating the majority of it to football while protecting the Cricket field for all other activities. The topic was not considered contentious at the time. The intentions behind this were to protect football on the traditional field while guaranteeing quality open recreational space to other clubs and the general recreational space for the growing population in Four Marks. The intention was to give a fair balance to enjoy the space for everyone wishing to use the recreation ground.

It also returned the layout of the recreation ground to the traditional layout, prior to the last Parish Council's abortive efforts to build an enormous new building. This building was proposed on the area occupied by the football practice pitch and the Scout Hut.

It quickly became apparent that the 'football lobby' was unhappy with the decisions made by the OS committee, but no formal request to review the policy was ever made.

Current position

Policy decisions typically last for 6 months if not challenged, or potentially longer as the status quo. It had been expected that an agenda item to review this policy would have been added to the OS meeting in February 2025, being 6 months from the original policy decision, but nothing was forthcoming. It has now been added for review and decision (via the Full Council) for the March 2025 OS Meeting. This document outlines the details proposed for the new policy.

Proposition

As stated, the overriding ambition of the OS committee is to find a fair balance for the limited resources available to the community. With this in mind the following recommendations are made to support a dual use trial on the Cricket Pitch.

Conditions & Safeguards

These are to be discussed and agreed by OS and passed to FC for ratification. The criteria are to minimise the impact of 9x9 football on the lower 1/3 of the Cricket field while respecting the open space for general leisure and other clubs, etc.

1. After the successful completion of the Cricket pitch assessment (on 27/02/25 – results to follow) the OS committee will seek agreement from Hampshire Cricket for the possible dual use with football on the lower part of the Cricket field.
2. The OS Committee will seek advice for damage limitation of the field during dual use which may include some limited rotation of space. – Note, the goal areas of the field are still badly worn after limited football use which ended 7 months ago.
3. It is recommended that a ‘full pitch assessment’ is carried out prior to the use of the Cricket field for football. This will give a benchmark for future pitch assessments including the annual review.
4. Any rotation of space will be in a frame work of space agreed by the OS committee, but suggested (subject to agreement) as the lower 1/3rd of the Cricket field. The Football pitch can be set anywhere within that framework to mitigate damage to the field. This will give the football team flexibility as well as an opportunity to reduce damage to the field. Any ‘relining’ of the field to reflect moving the pitch is at the Football club’s discretion and cost.
5. The dual use trial frameworks must respect the preservation of the Cricket Square and immediate surrounding area including the bowlers run up areas, etc.
6. The proposed trial period will be one football season (dates to be finalised) while a constant review of the ground condition will be taken – if possible, this will be before and after games or any other times during the trial period. The nature & method of these reviews will need to be established and agreed and will form part of the annual impact assessment and review.
7. The details of the pitch/field inspection & review need to be defined by a set of quantifiable criteria which is repeatable and equitable. Discussion with experts & organisations will be needed to establish these criteria and when agreed, will be used by all parties to objectively establish the impact & overall condition of the field.
8. It is expected that the proposed football pitch on the Cricket field would support no more than one (1) game per week, depending upon its condition. It is not expected to support any future tournaments or multiple games on the same day or over a weekend.
9. If the football pitch area was considered to have become too churned up (from assessment methods in item 6) then the OS committee reserve the rights to ask that games be postponed until the ground has recovered.
10. Additional methods will be considered to aid drainage and preservation of the football pitch including options of Verti draining and sanding. These options should be considered as an addition to this proposed policy and any expected impacts, process and costs must be agreed in advance of any work beginning. It should also be understood that the funding for these exercises is not implied or guaranteed by the Parish Council and all other avenues of funding should be explored.
11. Every reasonable effort will be made by representatives of the Parish Council and the football clubs to warn dog walkers and others of a football match on the day. It’s not considered practical at this time to attempt any form of ‘football exclusion zone’ as this will likely alienate other users & residents!

12. The lower approx. 1/3 of the Cricket pitch will be restricted to a youth 9x9 football pitch as the only identified need is for youth football. Adult 11x11 would not be considered for review until the building work on Benians was been completed allowing for evaluation of the impact of football on the Cricket field.
13. For the avoidance of doubt, youth 9x9 would be considered as under 11's football, but slightly older youth teams could be considered, on an ad hoc basis, depending upon the condition of the pitch, etc. But it should not be considered that this flexibility can become the accepted normal, but simply an effort to accommodate an exception.
14. All gathered data on pitch/field damage, opinions from dog walkers and other Cricket field users will be collated and assessed for use in an annual review.
15. The annual review will be conducted by the OS committee and if required (regardless of outcome) the recommendations will be ratified by the Full Council. A positive review would give license to the next full season of football on the lower 1/3 of the ground subject to ongoing assessments as previously outlined. A negative review would not necessarily mean the end of football on the field and it should be considered as an opportunity to mitigate the issues causing the negative review. That said, if the mitigation was considered impractical or overly expensive, then this recommendation would be presented for discussion and ratification to the Full Council.
16. The Cricket square will be identified, re-established and cordoned off with poles, ropes and signage. The OS committee will follow the recommendations of Hampshire Cricket to restore the quality of the Cricket Square for future use while encouraging junior Cricket teams (boys and girls) to play on the field.
17. It's understood that the FA can provide portable goals and portable flood lights which are apparently mandatory!
18. The effect upon other users of the Cricket field including dog walkers, archery, etc. will be assessed and where possible recorded for use in the annual review.
19. The benefits of open space for walking and dog walking should not be dismissed and there has been a lot of positive health and mental health data coming from Lockdown to support it. This highlights the need to balance between football and general leisure.
20. Where possible, the use of the Cricket field for football should be considered as the last option for games. The 'practice pitch' has recently been upgraded with LED lighting making it ideal for 9x9 football. Reducing the number of football games on the Cricket field will dramatically improve the condition of the field especially during wet period.
21. Going forwards, it would be interesting to evaluate a semi-synthetic Cricket square which would not only encourage more teams to play, but also reduce the time and effort in maintaining the playing area.

Summary

It is considered that with the necessary safeguards both future Cricket and 9x9 football can flourish on the Cricket field over the next few years. It must also be remembered that the vast majority of residents in Four Marks use the Recreation Ground for general leisure and may well be upset by the probable damage of the Cricket field by football. Their concerns must be part of the overall annual review, as well as those of existing and future clubs and societies.

With this in mind the approach of the Parish Council to this policy change must be accountable and practical and will require effort from all to ensure it become successful.

It is hoped that the OS committee will approve the dual use trial of 9x9 Football on the lower 1/3 of the Cricket field as per the conditions outlined in this supporting document.