

Message from Outgoing Parish Councillor: Laura Lucas

Please note that these thoughts are my personal opinions, not those of Whitchurch-On-Thames Parish Council (PC).

There has been some excitement around the PC's recent decision to begin charging sports groups for the use of the Village Green and I'd like to address it.

Firstly, it is very common for a Parish Village Green to pass on some of its maintenance charges to the groups that book it. Mature tree maintenance and grass cutting, for example, are not cheap unfortunately, and certainly use made by clubs such as football clubs and cricket clubs increases these costs by demanding regular care of the Green. Certainly all of our neighbouring Parish Village Greens charge groups for their use: it is a very normal thing to do.

One remit of the PC is to ensure that it represents the interests of all villagers: after all, all residents pay the precept by way of tax. It can be argued that the, until recently enjoyed, free access to the Green has unfairly benefited members of the sports clubs that use the Green: Yes, other groups, and residents such as dog walkers and picnickers, make use of the Green but additional costs are not associated with these activities. That is why it is quite usual for sports groups to receive an invoice for using such spaces: the charge is usually passed down to players in the form of a very small player fee payable at each match, making it both affordable and very unlikely to deter players. The idea of charging by the PC was certainly not a money-making exercise: in fact the current suggested charges do not cover Village Green upkeep, and the PC would certainly never wish to deter users.

In an ideal world, we would all enjoy free access to everything but it's simply impossible. Charges such as these are never going to prove popular, particular after such a long period of free use. I would ask residents to be reasonable and think about why the PC thought new charges would be a fairer system than no charges. This is worth bearing in mind in particular with reference to the Cricket Club: the vast majority of its members come from outside the village and therefore do not currently contribute to the Green's running costs at all via the council tax. I, myself, would certainly not expect free membership to and use of facilities of a sports club in Pangbourne, as much as I'd like it.

Recent statements that the PC and the Cricket Club have a 30 year agreement stating that the Cricket Club has free use of the Green are somewhat misleading. The agreement certainly sets out terms of use between the two entities but makes no mention of fees payable: zero or otherwise. There are currently 32 home matches booked into the Green's timetable by the Cricket Club this season and that excludes the junior fixtures (as yet still not advised to the Clerk). During those times, the Green is out of bounds to other users except spectators.

Last night's PC meeting (13 April) was attended by many members of the Cricket Club but the Parish Councillors are not answerable to the majority of them as they don't live within our Parish boundaries. Whilst it would surely love to accommodate everyone, the PC is only duty bound to its responsibilities to Parish residents as a whole: who were, in my opinion, both poorly represented in number and misrepresented at the meeting. Currently, the Parish Councillors are in a state of purdah: the time between an announced election and that election's final results. This means that the PC cannot legally make decisions on any new business, but the PC did recommend that the new PC, to be formed in May, carry out a public consultation among residents, and residents alone, with regard to its recommendation to charge sporting groups for use of your Village Green. One cricket club member suggested, last night, that locals would be happy to pay more tax to enable sporting groups' free access to the Green: but the PC believes that is your decision to make as residents.