

Community Wellbeing & Housing Committee



28 March 2023

Title	Tennis Court Capital Funding Opportunity
Purpose of the report	To decide whether to apply for capital funds from the Lawn Tennis Association.
Report Author	Kamal Mehmood - Strategic Lead Leisure & Community
Ward(s) Affected	All Wards
Corporate Priority	Community, Environment and Service Delivery.
Recommendations	<p>The Committee is asked to consider the 3 options and confirm which they would like to pursue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Option 1: Agree to apply for the funding as soon as possible and forecast the future maintenance costs into the Council budget, keeping all tennis courts free of charge to the whole community.• Option 2: Agree to apply for the funding as soon as possible and forecast the future maintenance costs into the Council budget, but introducing a fee structure for some members of the community.• Option 3: Decline the opportunity to apply for funding from the LTA and finance the tennis court refurbishments from the Council's on going repair and maintenance budget.
Reason for Recommendation	To increase the opportunity for our communities to play outdoor tennis both now and in the future through the potential securing of external capital funding for tennis court refurbishment.

1. Summary of the report

- 1.1 This report seeks views on the opportunity to apply for capital funding from the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA).
- 1.2 The LTA are offering the Council the opportunity to apply for approx. £140k to refurbish its park tennis courts and implement a booking system that allows for tennis participation to be measured.
- 1.3 The LTA originally confirmed the opportunity to apply expires at the end of March 2023. However, a recent update from the LTA confirms that higher construction costs mean the overall pot is depleting more quickly than they anticipated, and therefore, if the Council is interested, it is advised to apply as soon as possible.

1.4 MAT are asked to consider the benefits of applying this funding vs the disbenefits.

2. Key issues

2.1 Spelthorne BC has 20 outdoor tennis courts over 6 sites. The courts are currently free to use for the community. The courts at Fordbridge Park are self managed by a private coaching company on a lease basis. A 10 year programme of tennis court refurbishment was completed in 2014, but some courts were not included at this time. The LTA suggest that there is an immediate need for investment of £60k at Ashford Recreation Ground for the courts to remain playable. There is no recent audit of the current condition of all courts other than the monthly safety inspections undertaken by a contractor. It is observed that the courts are fairly well used, although as there is no booking or entry process to the courts, this view cannot be supported with data.

2.2 There have been no recent customer surveys to indicate why some courts are more frequently used than others and whether this is affected by the condition of courts.

2.3 The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) has received £30 million from the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the LTA Trust to refurbish 4,500 tennis courts across the country to support a new generation of players into the sport. The funding is to refurbish playing surfaces and fencing where necessary, update nets and install new access gates.

2.4 The LTA are offering the Council the opportunity to apply for £140k to refurbish its park tennis courts and introduce a gate access system to measure participation. This would raise the profile and culture of tennis within the borough and quality of facilities within our parks. Appendix D outlines in the detail, the reasons why the LTA would like to do this.

2.5 This opportunity meets the Council's Corporate Plan Priorities by:

- putting our communities at the heart of this opportunity by improving facilities to encourage healthy lifestyles both now and in the future;
- maintaining a clean, green and attractive borough;
- adapting services to meet new challenges, new ways of working and different ways of interacting with our communities.

2.6 The Council's neighbouring boroughs of Slough, Hounslow, Hillingdon, Runnymede and Windsor & Maidenhead have all submitted successful application forms and are approved in principle for this LTA funding. These boroughs have chosen to charge for tennis bookings; however, this is not mandatory. It is the Council's choice whether they remain free or become chargeable. There is however a requirement that accepting funding means committing to future sustainability of all sites.

2.7 Elmbridge Borough Council installed the tennis court gate system and charges for court use in 2017. Later that year charges were removed due to

customer comments/changes in political administration. A new free tennis membership with free court access all year round, for 2 hours every weekday, at every venue was introduced. In April 2021 Elmbridge then re-introduced a charging structure for tennis courts which is proving to be successful. (Appendix E). Elmbridge are very happy to provide tours of their facilities or further information if we would like this.

2.8 Requirements of the LTA funding:

- A booking system and gate entry system must be in place. This would be the LTA'S own 'ClubSpark' system. Setting up as a new member of the public on ClubSpark takes a couple of minutes. Once an account is made, free or chargeable courts can be booked within one minute. A code is sent to the person's email account and they are required to enter that code on the keypad on the gate.
- A booking system does not automatically mean a cost to the public. Customers can still access courts for free - they simply book their free slot using the online ClubSpark booking system which provides assurance that their court time is theirs.
- That the Council confirms its commitment to budget for the bookings system, future maintenance and court repairs. These are set out in Appendix A.

2.9 Operational Considerations

- Accepting the funding would mean that the tennis courts are locked via the gate system and children/adults could not go and have a casual game without booking online – the counter argument for this is that by booking online the risk of all courts being used when a customer turns up is mitigated. Free tennis coaching for adults and children as part of the community tennis offer would take place. This has been done in previous years and it has worked well.
- Vandalism could be a risk as the outdoor Spelthorne courts experienced this during Covid when they were locked – the counter argument for this is that there will be a booking system in place and court signage. The unauthorised use of locked courts would have to be enforced. This type of enforcement is usually undertaken by the JET team although this would have to be confirmed if this project was approved.
- The court signage will make it clear a code only works 10mins before the booking starts and will also provide a phone number for players to call if a code doesn't work, to be issued an override code, which CIA (the gate company) update regularly.
- Leisure & Community Development would field calls relating to complaints.
- ClubSpark has an in-built payment platform, Stripe. This Stripe account then be monitored by the Local Authority to see income. The Local

Authority can then decide how regularly this money moves from Stripe into the LA's designated bank account.

- Lewisham Borough Council, which has a similar socio-economic profile to Spelthorne, has recently adopted a gate entry system. We have approached them for feedback but unfortunately haven't received this. Elmbridge Borough Council, as mentioned earlier, now have a successful scheme and charge for playing tennis. Woking Borough Council have also been successfully operating a chargeable gate entry system for many years as have Bracknell Forest Council.

3. Options analysis and proposal

3.1 Option 1: Agree to apply for the funding as soon as possible and forecast the future maintenance costs into the Council budget, keeping all tennis courts free of charge to the community.

3.2 The benefits of this option include:

- receiving in the region of £140k from the LTA to resurface and refurbish the Council's outdoor tennis courts where needed;
- raising the profile of tennis in Spelthorne and the quality of outdoor tennis court facilities in our parks;
- allowing the community free access to good quality community tennis courts both now and in the longer-term future i.e., beyond their current useful court life;
- bookable access to tennis courts for the community i.e., no longer the risk of turning up and not being able to play on a free court;
- it will help us to track tennis court usage. This will enable us to target tennis development work in the right areas;
- maximising the opportunity to receive external funding for the Council to upgrade the quality of leisure facilities;
- ensuring the useful life of the current tennis courts is extended to 12 years;
- improving the courts to provide further free community tennis coaching programmes;
- increasing usage of the tennis courts as quality increases;
- securing the infrastructure to charge for tennis court usage in the future should Council circumstances warrant.

3.3 Disbenefits of this option include:

- Increasing the Council's own level of revenue investment in community tennis courts over the next 12-15 years to maintain the high standard and raised profile of the sport. The LTA estimate this would require investment of £24k per year totalling up to £288k over 12 years. There would also be additional annual revenue oncosts of £5k per year. See Appendix A for full details.

- Limiting free access to tennis to those living in our least advantaged wards. Some residents will struggle to find £2 to play tennis.
- The likelihood of vandalism to the gates. During COVID when the courts were locked, members of the public were breaking the fences to get onto the courts.
- The perceived inconvenience to the public in having to book a court via ClubSpark rather than walking onto a court at any time. This is a change that could be managed with notice and guidance to our community, alongside communicating the benefit that there is no longer a risk of turning up and not being able to get onto a tennis court.
- Some residents may not have a mobile phone/credit to book courts, although there would be plans in place to run accessible sessions if this project was approved.

3.4 Option 2: Agree to apply for the funding and introduce a nominal hourly court fee to offset the estimated maintenance and repair costs over the next 12 years. The Council would have to fund the remaining costs. Those living in disadvantaged areas would still receive free access through access code provision. Disadvantaged communities would be identified via local demographic statistics and approved via the community wellbeing and housing committee. The nominal fees would be £2 per hour and £15 per year for a season ticket. This would provide a predicted income of £15.5k per year. This income figure has been predicted using LTA insight from live data at other similar LA park sites. This would require a reduced capital sinking fund of £8.5k per year totalling up to £102k over 12 years. The annual revenue costs of £4k per year would still need to be found. See appendix B for more information.

3.5 The benefits of this option include:

- All the cultural, social and health benefits of increasing the profile of tennis in the borough – as listed in point 3.2
- A reduced annual repair and maintenance expenditure of £8.5k per year.
- Self-sustainable outdoor tennis courts over the next 12-years at lower cost to the Council.
- A new income stream for the Council, some of which could go back into supporting free community tennis development.

3.6 The disbenefits of this option include:

- limiting free access to tennis to those living in our least advantaged wards. Some residents will struggle to find £2 to play tennis.
- As in 3.3 there may be perceived inconvenience to the public in having to book a court via ClubSpark rather than walking onto a court at any time. This could be managed as stated in 3.3.
- The likelihood of vandalism to the gates. During COVID when the courts were locked, members of the public were breaking the fences to get onto the courts.

- Some residents may not have a mobile phone/credit to book courts, although there would be plans in place to run accessible sessions if this project was approved.

3.7 Option 3: Decline the opportunity to apply for funding from the LTA and finance the tennis court refurbishments from the Council's on-going repair and maintenance budget over the next 12 years.

3.8 The benefits of this option include:

- Not having to ask the community to pay nominal fees or book online for tennis courts. i.e., accessible unlocked courts.

Not having the increased risk of vandalism to court fences due to people breaking in when the gate is locked.

The disbenefits of this option include:

- the Council having to find ongoing tennis court refurbishment costs to keep the courts playable to a good standard over the next 12 years. The LTA envisage that this would include immediate need for investment of £60k at Ashford Recreation Ground for the courts to remain playable. The LTA estimate the total cost of refurbishment over 12 years is 280k. This is broken down in Appendix C.
- the Council would have no opportunity to track usage, increase participation or improve the infrastructure to generate a potentially new income stream for the future.

4. Financial implications

4.1 See below for summary of options and associated capital costs. The LTA have provided guidance regarding costs based on their extensive experience working with other local authorities on this project.

OPTION	Estimated Maintenance cost per year	Capital Cost to Council over 12 years
Option 1: Apply for the LTA funding and keep all courts free of charge	£24k	Up to £288k
Option 2: Apply for the LTA funding and charge nominal fee to offset ongoing costs	£8.5k	Up to £102k
Option 3: Decline the LTA funding	£23k	Up to £280k

5. Risk considerations

5.1 With increasing pressures on council budgets, funding for tennis court maintenance may be cut and courts that are in a poor state of repair may have to close. This is an opportunity to take advantage of funding from the LTA which may not come up again.

5.2 Introducing a charge may be unpopular with the public and councillors.

5.3 Audit have been consulted and their observations taken on board.

6. Procurement considerations

6.1 There are no procurement issues at this stage.

7. Legal considerations

7.1 The report was circulated to the Legal Team. We did not receive any comments.

8. Other considerations

8.1 TBC

9. Equality and Diversity

9.1 The council intend for courts to remain accessible to all, and even with the proposed introduction of fees would include free access to households on low income. Option 1 offers full inclusivity however Option 2 also offers free access to low income households and access to all via a nominal charge of £2.

10. Sustainability/Climate Change Implications

10.1 Extending the lifespan and quality of the current courts shows that the Council is committed to maintaining a clean, green and attractive borough – as per the Corporate Plan priorities.

11. Timetable for implementation

11.1 The opportunity to apply to the LTA expires at the end of March 2023. However, a recent update indicates the overall grant pot is depleting more quickly than anticipated due to higher construction costs, so a decision to apply or not is required as soon as possible.

12. Contact

12.1 The contact for queries relating to this report is Kamal Mehmood – K.Mehmood@spelthorne.gov.uk

Background papers:

There are none.

Appendices:

Appendix A: No charge for tennis usage

Appendix B: Charging nominal fees

Appendix C: Declining the LTA funding (do nothing)

Appendix D: LTA Why Gate Entry System

Appendix E: Elmbridge Parks Tennis Review 2022