

Review of Charges for Six Acres

The Land known as Six Acres was purchased by Wickhambrook Parish Council in 1974.

After a period when the area, including the pavilion and tennis courts was managed by the Memorial Social Centre, the responsibility was handed back to Wickhambrook Parish Council in 2003. At this stage, agreements were drawn up between the Parish Council and the various users of the land to safeguard the Parish Council's assets and to provide a semi-formal framework within which all parties are aware of their roles and responsibilities. The agreements were set for periods of one year and have been renewed annually.

The rents stated in the agreement(s) were set at a peppercorn level at this time. The agreements allow for the rent to be reviewed and agreed between the parties before the renewal of the agreement (Sample agreement attached as **Appendix A**).

The agreements also state that the Parish Council shall not be liable for repair, maintenance or upkeep of the facility. Notwithstanding this, the Parish Council has paid for mowing of the Recreation Ground (over the past 6 financial years), and maintenance of the hedges and banks to the Bowls Club (since 2019/20) and payment of water charges, and cutting of grass around the tennis courts.

The charges were last reviewed in 2023 (Report WPC.23.07.08 and Min 23.07.15 refer), when no changes were made. Wickhambrook Parish Council's Financial Standing Orders oblige the Parish Council to review the charges annually. Any change to the charges would need to be in agreement with the parties (usually before a renewal of the agreement).

The financial income and expenditure (ex VAT) for Six Acres/Recreation Ground is:

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Income	-£20.00	-£50.00	-£50.00	-£20.00	-£20.00	£20.00*
Expenditure						
Grounds Contract	£2,935.20	£4,800.00	£3120.00	£6255.00	£5815.00	£1754.41**
Other	£45.00	£10.00		£40.00	£40.00	£40.00*
Trees		£180.00	£180.00	£270.00	£250.00	£416.00*
Water	£992.84	£99.54	£147.96	£193.14	£348.38	0.38**
Total	£2,980.20	£5089.54	£3447.96	£6758.14	£6453.38	£2210.79
Cost	£2,950.20	£5039.54	£3397.96	£6738.14	£6433.38	
Reserves	£2,000.00	£2,500.00	£2,500.00	£2,500.00	£1250.00	£1650***

*Budgeted

** Actual to date

***Grounds and Asset Maintenance

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It is recognised that many clubs in the parish have struggled over time to attract and maintain memberships (the Adult Football team has now closed down) and falling membership impacts on their costs and reserves.

Recorded Grants in Kind for 2023-24 and the first Quarter of 2024.25

Organisation	Grounds Maintenance	Water	Total 2022-23
Wickhambrook Memorial Social Centre	£400.00 £450.00 <u>£1320.00</u> <u>£2170.00</u>	-	£2170.00
Bowls Club	£675.00	£348.46	£1023.46
Tennis Club	£320.00		£320.00
Total			£3513.46

Organisation	Grounds Maintenance	Water	Total Q1 2023-24
Wickhambrook Memorial Social Centre	£700.00 <u>£354.41</u> <u>£1054.41</u>		£1054.41
Bowls Club	£118.13	0.38*	£118.51
Tennis Club	£105.00	-	£105.00
Total			£1277.92

Based on the first Quarter of 2024.25, in kind donations over the current financial year relating to Six Acres/Recreation Ground are likely to be approximately £5000.00.

Any increase in charges which would reduce the overall cost to the parish council is likely to place a disproportionate burden on small clubs in the parish, which make a significant contribution to the health and well being of residents of the parish.

The parish council has powers to provide

- and maintain land for public recreation (Public Health Act 1875, s.164)
- manage recreation grounds, public walks, pleasure grounds and open spaces (Public Health Act 1875, s.164)
- sports facilities and staff in or outside of the council's area or contribute towards the expenses of any voluntary organisation or local authority that provides sports facilities etc. in or outside of the council's area (Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 s.19)

The parish also has powers to donate to organisations (Local Government Act 1976 s.137) up to certain limits (£9.93 per elector). The parish had 1042 electors at the last registration (equivalent to £10,347.06). Before incurring expenditure under the section, the council must be satisfied that there is a direct benefit to the area or part of the area, or to some or all of the inhabitants. The direct benefit accruing to the area, etc. must be commensurate with the expenditure incurred. This appears to mean that the council must not spend an excessive amount on a very narrow object (for example, spending the whole of its allowance under the section for the benefit of two or three individuals). If the benefit to the area is not commensurate with the expenditure, the expenditure could be challenged by the auditor, or by an objector at audit.

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This consideration may be particularly relevant to in kind funding of the Bowls Club. Since the last review, the clerk has moved suppliers to reduce (and fix) the standing monthly charge and moved to monthly meter readings to avoid the peaks and troughs of estimated bills. With a credit against an earlier invoice offsetting the standing water charges, the net effect in the current year to date is £0.38 (standing charges approximately 6.50 per month). Water consumption will continue to be monitored, but with a wet spring, this is unlikely to result in the charges experienced in the past two years. Councillors may wish to consider whether full funding of water supply is appropriate, or whether the cost of this could be offset by (for example), an increase in ground rent or a reduction in grounds maintenance support.

One remaining issue remains to be addressed. The two remaining clubs with agreements on Six Acres have resulted in some work for the clerk in terms not just of invoicing, but chasing the agreement(s), payment and copies of public liability insurance. In 2023/24, each club had to be reminded twice, and this takes time and adds costs to the administration.

One approach may be to increase the peppercorn rent to £35.00, which would cover two hours administration per club. As a minimum, the rent should be increased to cover one hour of administrative time (£15).

Action:

The parish council is asked to consider any increase in charges (effective in the next financial year) for the parish council to approve in its next budget, and any other adjustment to the level of in-kind financial support for clubs.