

Agenda item 5

For decision – Possible acquisition of an open space near Broadway (and Oakfield Road)

Author: Chris Stringer, Environment Manager

Summary

We have been approached by a group of over 200 residents asking that FTC takes on responsibility for the management and upkeep of an open space off Broadway, by way of a freehold transfer from Mendip District Council (MDC)

This report presents a letter from the residents who have collectively formed the Broadway Allotments and Community Garden Association.

The report then highlights various discussion points, recommends carrying on conversations with the local community about ideas for the space and formally carrying on discussions with MDC about the potential for the land to be transferred to FTC.

Background

The space is located to the west of Frome in the Oakfield Ward and is currently owned by MDC.

It has been largely neglected for a number of years now; and prompted by this, a group of residents has asked that FTC works with them in taking on responsibility for the space, and then looking after it for the benefit of the local community.

The space

Access on foot or bike is via a path that runs across the southern edge of the space. To the east, the path narrows behind the properties on Broadway and eventually comes out next to the garages at the end of Lynfield Road. To the west, the path comes out onto Oakfield Road.



As suggested above and mentioned in the letter from the residents, the space has been neglected for a significant time and the result is that the site is dominated by overgrown brambles. The space is a far cry from the managed site it once was, and it doesn't seem to have a plan or a purpose at this time. In short, it's not being obviously looked after; and it is far from welcoming – factors that have almost certainly contributed to the littering and fly-tipping that is apparent.

The overgrowth is also making it difficult to properly assess the trees that are growing here and to work out the extents of the area.

Even so, the space represents a tremendous opportunity.

The local community has already drawn up early plans for the space that introduce a number of ideas and show how much could happen here. The current plan is shown at Appendix 2 (available at the meeting).

And happily, the space could see trees planted as part of our Wild about Trees campaign and areas managed as part of our Wild about Frome initiative.

Next steps

The next key step will be securing MDC's agreement to transfer the space to FTC.

This will involve working with the community to formally present FTC's request to the Phoenix Board at MDC. This is something that will need to happen soon, since staff at MDC have confirmed that the Phoenix Board will also be considering the value and development potential of the space (against and as an alternative to transferring the area to FTC).

If the Phoenix Board agrees to the transfer the freehold to FTC there will be a formal and legal process to follow. One complicating factor could be that the various boundaries in their present state may not exactly match the boundaries of the Title Deed held by MDC. Certainly, there are some fences that don't seem to line up with those of neighbouring properties.

But if the transfer can be agreed in principle, we can progress discussions with the local community with more certainty and purpose. We can also agree to work taking place on the ground while the formalities of the agreement are drawn up.

Community stewardship

Looking ahead, it's suggested that the only routine work that is taken on by the Rangers from day one is a weekly safety check; it is good practice and something we do for all the spaces that we look after.

After this, the space lends itself brilliantly to providing opportunities for community stewardship. This could see some Ranger-led sessions initially. These sessions would focus on general advice and passing on the skills and confidence necessary for the upcoming and

planned tasks as well highlighting the next areas to work on. In between Ranger sessions, the community can coordinate and lead lots more sessions to start re-shaping and improving the area in the ways they want.

The approach the community will take will be patient and sensitive and one that reflects the ecology of the space and practicalities on the ground:

- Valuing, protecting and enhancing the existing ecological value will be essential. For example, work schedules and volunteer opportunities will be framed by nesting and breeding seasons
- Work outdoors is naturally seasonal and dependent on the weather and ground conditions, as well
- There is very limited vehicle access to the space at the present time; so, clearance works (including litter picks) will see lots of work completed by hand

This approach might see improvements happen slowly and steadily, rather than immediately. But giving the community the opportunities to do more of the work will bring its own rewards.

In short, there's lots of work to be done here and we'll be looking to support the community in achieving their aspirations.

Notes

- There aren't any Section 106 agreements in place at the present time that could be used to improve the space. For this reason, it's felt that any discussions with MDC should include the possibility of a dowry; after all, FTC will be taking on MDC's maintenance costs
- Regardless and separate to this, FTC would also expect to see the transfer of the space fairly and properly reflected in the Special Expenses element of future Council Tax levies
- Our preference is for the freehold of the space; if not, it's recommended that FTC looks to a 99-year lease similar to that negotiated elsewhere, to include full management responsibility
- Lastly, we would hope and expect that that any lease would be at a peppercorn rent

Recommendations

1. Delegate responsibility to the Lead Ranger to carry on early conversations with the local community about ideas for the space
2. Delegate responsibility to the Environment Manager (supported by the Town Clerk) to continue discussions with MDC about the possibility of taking on the freehold of the land (preferred); or a long-term lease in line with the leases already agreed for other green spaces recently transferred from MDC to FTC
3. Report back to Council when the transfer has been completed
4. Report back to the Council Matters committee in due course with a Management & Improvement plan for the space