

Agenda item 4

For decision - To establish a Community Woodland (Near Spring Gardens)

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Figure 1 Aerial view of proposed community woodland site



Summary

It is proposed to work with the local community to establish a community woodland. FTC would be the leaseholder of the site, based on a 99 year lease. FTC's responsibility will be to support the community group to establish the woodland and then support the community to maintain it over time. As in other open spaces owned by FTC, we would provide a safety net to ensure that the site is well managed over time.

Increased tree planting in this type of place makes a significant contribution to our commitment to mitigate climate change and the ecological emergency. In the current Town Plan programme - Nurturing our open spaces - this project directly supports the following objective.

What are we trying to achieve?

- 1. Biodiversity rich accessible and safe places for residents and visitors to enjoy exercise and relax in that present an attractive 'face' for the town*
- 2. Greater ownership of and control over our open spaces and their future use*

This project also supports one of FTC's underlying aims of enabling the community to engage more in their town.

Background and the current situation

Around 20 years ago the site had been managed as a goat farm but this ended after foot and mouth. At that time, the site was sensitively managed for access and wildlife interest and the

owners have long wanted the land to be of benefit to the community of Frome. For a long time the site has been used for horse grazing without the land owner's consent (see below).

Project summary

This project will establish a new community woodland on an area of improved grassland that currently has very limited wildlife or amenity value. The site is located on the northern edge of Frome, near Spring Gardens (the Frome Town boundary runs through the field), bounded by the river, Jacks Lane, Cuckoo Lane and the railway. It is connected to Frome by the riverside footpath that runs from Weylands and Whatcombe fields and through this site (the footpath forming the town boundary). The site is two hectares (4 ½ acres) in size.

The project has evolved from a review by three groups with aligned interests: a local community group, a landowner and Frome Town Council.

The community group are looking to establish a memorial woodland in Frome, the landowner is looking for their site to provide community benefit and as a Council we are both looking to enhance biodiversity, in this project, by increasing tree coverage and species rich grassland as well as enhancing the community value of green spaces.

The community group has raised funds as is continuing to raise funds to cover the costs of the woodland creation and the project is co-ordinated by a landscape architect who has professional experience creating woodlands. Draft designs have been produced based on habitat-appropriate native tree species, native wildflower grassland with rides, glades and riverside seating. The aim would be for the footpaths to be DDA/access-for-all compliant with suitable gradient, surface quality and passing places, ensuring all can explore the site and reach the tranquil riverside seating at the furthest end.

Geography, ecology and public access

Figure 2 View across mostly flat site, rising from river on L to treeline and railway (out of site) on R.



The site is currently species poor grassland with some scrub islands with a woodland fringe bounded by roads, river and the railway. The site is about 2ha (4.5 acres) located near Spring

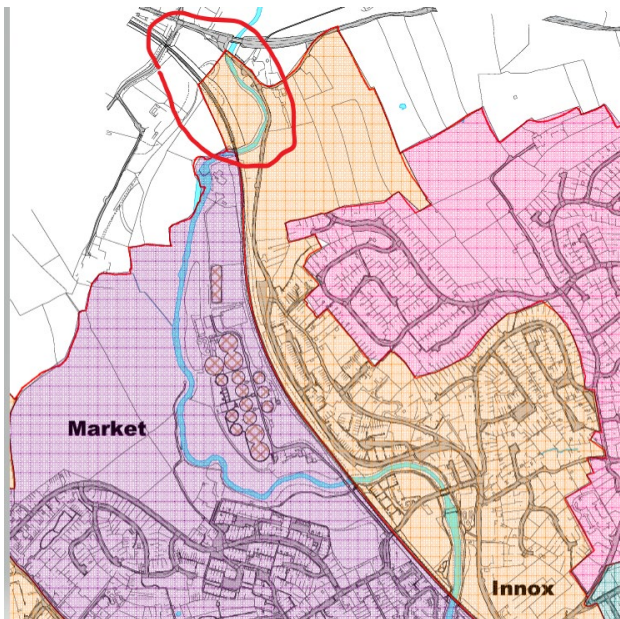
Gardens with a relatively sheltered NE aspect, mostly gently sloping from the railway to the river.

Figure 3 Showing gently rising land to R with existing scrub island.



The site is to the north of Frome, with all but the far side of the footpath just within the town's parish boundary, part of the Innox ward.

Figure 4 Location within Town Council boundary - Innox Ward

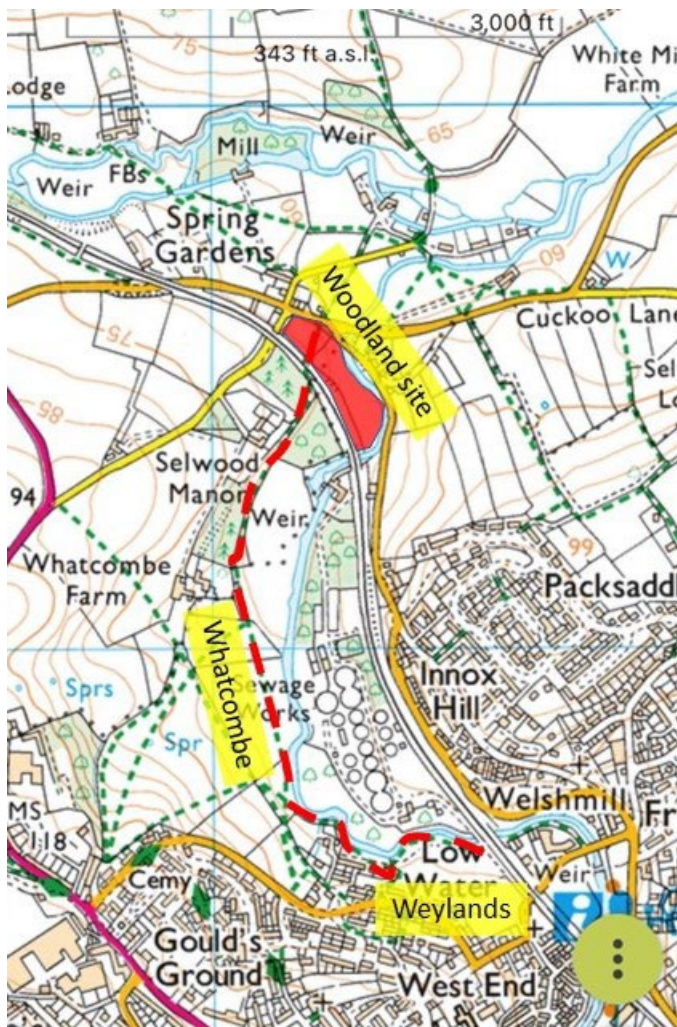


The site sits within the landscape character area of the Avon Vales (117). This is characterised by low lying, clay dominated open landscape. Mixture of arable and pasture with small and medium sized fields with mostly hedgerow boundaries.

Figure 5 Footpath Network around site



Figure 6 Walk from Town Centre to Proposed Site



Connections to a future Sustrans Cycle Path

The site lies very close to the possible new route for the cycle path connection to Sustrans Colliers Way (NCN24) – the project known as the Missing Links. The land itself was reviewed by this project as a possible route, but was found not to be viable. It would be ideal to foster links with the Missing Links project and Sustrans route as it will potentially run right next to the site on the other side of the pedestrian railway crossing. If this comes to pass we could enable cycling access to the community woodland with bikes racks at that access point.

Figure 7 - Location of proposed site and Missing Links cycle route

New section, Elliots Lane, Hapsford.
It's not finished yet, but you are welcome to walk the route although please note:

- Uneven path
- Trip hazards
- Use at entirely your own risk
- May be closed for work to continue
- This is a permissive path by kind permission of the landowners. Please respect that

FROME'S MISSING LINKS
www.FromesMissingLinks.org.uk

sustrans
JOIN THE MOVEMENT

To Radstock
Great Elm
Hapsford
Egford
Frome

New section open for walking
The Missing Link Only ~350m
In progress
Complete

Spring Gardens

Want to see this section completed and surfaced for use by all types of user?
Then please sponsor or donate!
<https://fromesmissinglinks.org.uk/donate/>

Proposed site in yellow

Figure 8 Flood zones around site (orange = high risk, yellow = medium risk)

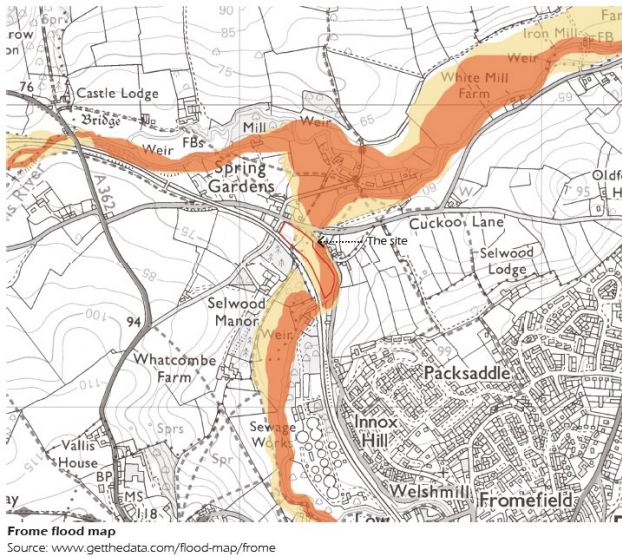


Figure 9 Photo showing riverside boundary and low-lying land.



Land ownership

The proposal would be for Frome Town Council to take on a 99-year lease on a peppercorn rent to underwrite the long-term management of the site as a community woodland.

The landowners may reserve for their own use a portion of the land on the far side of the footpath, this is to be confirmed.

At this stage in project development, detailed designs and costing have not been completed and the community group continues to fund raise but the aim is that the community group will bear the establishment costs.

The Design

The community group are seeking to set up a memorial woodland in the memory of a recently deceased Frome resident. The vision is for a woodland of native trees set in a wildflower rich grassland with glades, rides and access-for-all footpaths leading the visitor through a trail of emerging views finally emerging at a tranquil spot with seating by the river. The trees would all be native species suited to the site habitat (wetland or freely draining loamy floodplain soils) and might include some continuity of the spindle woodland on the far side of the railway that is a remnant of Frome's industrial history.

The lead co-ordinator for the community, James Hamilton, is a landscape architect who is an associate Director at SEED Landscape (www.seedlandscape.com), with a professional background in similar woodland creation projects, and they have created the draft design below.

The woodland would consist of approximately 2,700 trees, which equates to about 10% of FTC's stated goal of planting as many trees as residents.

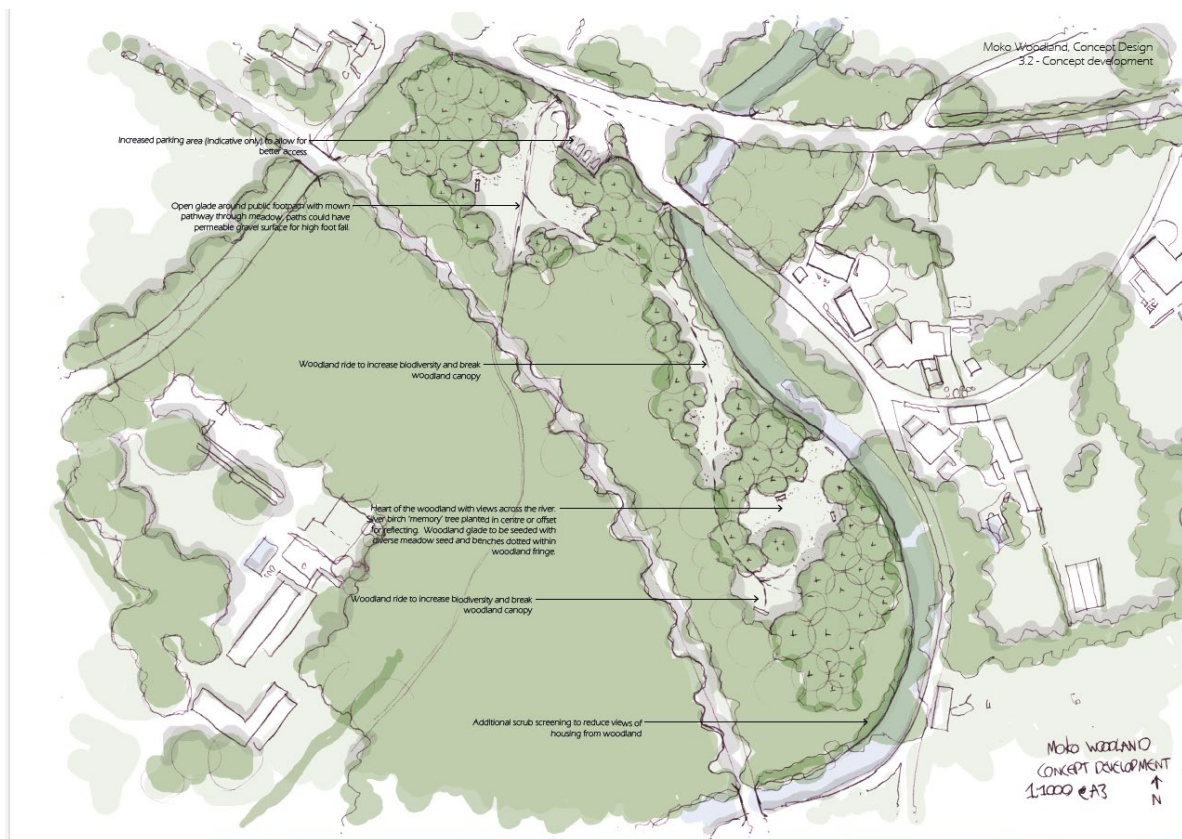
The aim would be for contractors and Frome community volunteers to undertake the majority of the establishment work and for volunteers to lead on most of the ongoing pasture and woodland management. Ranger involvement would be supporting these tasks, taking on more technical tasks such as tree surgery or infrastructure maintenance/improvement, but also as the safety net ensuring management for biodiversity and access in case of any lulls in volunteer availability.

The technique planned for establishing the new meadow grassland setting for the woodland would be that of removing the top layer of high fertility grass and soil. While this technique brings some complexity and cost, it is the surest method for maximising the potential for creating a successful biodiverse species rich grass/flower sward using native local seed mix (as species rich native seed requires infertile ground). Islands of scrub within the woodland and on its fringes would be established.

Figure 30 Existing layout of the site.



Figure 41 Proposed draft design.



Vacant possession - fly grazing

The land has a long history of having been grazed by a horse/horses without permission.

There is a well-used public footpath running across the site and, over the years, there have been a number of incidents of walkers/runners having been disturbed by the horses. Over this winter (2022/23) there were a series of incidents of the current horse biting visitors. Recently the Somerset Council Rights of Way team requested that for safety reasons the horses were prevented from accessing the footpath and secured the erection of an electric fence.

The landowners have worked with different agencies, including the Mendip enforcement officer, rights of way team, MP and RSPCA seeking to end the practice of fly grazing.

While there is no legal right for the grazier to remain without landowner permission, there has been a long history of seeking to end the grazing to no avail.

For the project to proceed, the first step is to remove the horse(s) from the site. Many attempts over the years have been made to engage with the owner, including with the help of the Mendip (now Somerset) enforcement officer, who has a very good understanding of the situation. While this has ensured awareness that the grazing is taking place without permission, no solution has been found so far to end this.

We would seek to engage in constructive and supportive conversations with the horse owner about moving on from the site and the clear aim and preference would be for the grazing to

end after these discussions. We are not in a position to recommend alternative sites to the horse owner.

The hope is that by engaging the owner in a new conversation, where it is explained that the Council will be sponsoring a project which will change forever the aspect from open meadow to woodland, that this would clearly show that the site is now set to no longer be suitable for grazing. The aim is that this discussion will result in an agreement for the horses to be removed.

As a last resort, if no constructive outcome were possible through discussion, we would need to use bailiffs to remove the horse if absolutely necessary.

The establishment of the woodland

The community group seeking to set up the woodland have been very active with fundraising with a dedicated website and a crowdfunder scheme and are seeking to raise £25k for the project (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/edm8br-to-plant-a-woodland-in-memory-of-moko>). This would cover the costs of removing the top soil, purchasing the native trees, planting/mulching and sourcing/sowing the wild grass seed.

It is expected that the community involved with the set-up/fundraising, together with volunteers from across Frome, would provide the people power to plant/mulch the trees, sow the grass seed and install any benches. We would seek to encourage local volunteers to also support the ongoing works of tree pruning, ride cutting and path/bench/boundary fence maintenance.

The ranger team would be on hand to provide technical skills for more complex tasks such as tree surgery, and also to be the safety net to ensure that the necessary access/site management works are undertaken if there is a lull in volunteer capacity for any reason.

An indicative estimate of ranger time would be 10 people (ppl) days per year

- Winter – 1 to 2 group days (3 or more rangers) = up to 6 ppl days
- Summer – worst case possible fortnightly grass cuts = 2 hours incl. travel/2 weeks for 6 months = 3.5 ppl days (possibly much less)

Parking

There is a small informal lay-by car park at the site's entrance which is mostly used as daily parking by nearby residents. While one option could be to make some improvements to this space, with FTC's aim to encourage active travel, it is anticipated that the majority of access to the site would be from the footpath from Weylands/Whatcombe fields or by bike.

Pros

- A site with very limited community appeal could become a very engaging tranquil green space with winding woodland accessible walks and peaceful riverside seating
- The site would provide therefore significant community benefit as well as an opportunity to engage with the local environment and developing a valuable community resource.

- A big step contributing to FTC's target of planting as many trees as we have residents (10%)
- A contribution to addressing both net zero (a large carbon sink) and the biodiversity emergency by providing bird/bat connectivity corridors, promoting high quality pollinator/butterfly friendly wildflower rich meadow

Cons

- The single most challenging aspect of the project would be enabling the project to begin by the removal of grazing horses.
- While the aspiration would be for the site to bring communities together through co-management this will inevitably require some FTC co-ordination as well as ranger support for technical tasks and everyday tasks where volunteer capacity requires

Costs

- The site rent would be a peppercorn
- The community have raised almost £25k funds to cover the set-up costs of removing the top-soil, purchasing/planting/mulching approx. 2,700 trees, the purchase of habitat specific wildflower rich native meadow grass seed, creating the access-for-all footpath and seating, renewal of necessary boundary fences. There are no design costs (normally up to half the total costs)
- FTC would have the costs of legal fees (approx £3-4k), as a last resort ballif fees (£5k) and, for review, possibly supporting any necessary follow-on security measures such as more robust roadside fencing.
- A reserve fund to cover unexpected costs (£3k)

Resource

- Ranger time of up to 10 person days/year
- Some limited management time to oversee community relations/land management
- Community engagement time to monitor and support volunteer recruitment as necessary

Timescales

The aim would be for planting to take place this winter (bare root season Oct - April). For this to happen the grazing situation would need to be resolved in the autumn with the topsoil removal very shortly thereafter. If the project is able to start this winter, it would reach set-up completion by spring 2024.

Recommendations

1. Work in partnership with the community and especially the local group to establish a community woodland on the edge of Frome near Spring Gardens
2. Take out a 99 year lease with the land owner on a peppercorn rent
3. Approve the expenditure listed in the report
4. Resolve the fly grazing issue
5. Work in partnership with the local community to manage the woodland in future

