

For decision: Transfer of Packsaddle Park from Mendip District Council to Frome Town Council

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Summary

This report proposes to work with local people and MDC in order to acquire the freehold of two open green spaces at Packsaddle Way and Chapman's Close.

Background

For several years, the small open space and park on the corner of Pedlars Grove and Packsaddle Way, which I will call 'Packsaddle Park', was allowed to run down by Mendip District Council (MDC). Playground facilities were removed when they became worn out or broken and were not replaced. This left only two toddler rockers and a swing, with little to do and nowhere to sit and admire the great views of countryside around Frome. The open space at Chapman's Close is also in need of attention, there being a hard court with a basketball hoop, and a grassed area, but where ball games are restricted by proximity to the neighbouring residents.

I have been impressed by the 'community building' work of Jane Bennett and the rest of the Packsaddle Community Group in their work since 2012 based on the idea of using and enhancing the open spaces for the whole community. The Community Group have organised a number of community events and parties, play sessions with the Wansdyke Play Association, and community consultations which asked residents how they want to improve the area.

I understand the most popular things people want to see at the Packsaddle Park were more seating, some new play equipment, a circular cycle path, and a boules pitch, i.e. not just more children's play equipment. I was also pleased to be able to help the Community Group by setting up meetings and discussions with MDC officers.

In 2013, the Community Group applied successfully for funding from Frome Town Council towards the cost of seating and a boules pitch at Packsaddle Park. It turned some tree trunks into new seating, which were relocated away from the nearest neighbours in spring 2014 to avoid further nuisance and which are now happily found at the other side of the park. Picnic benches, including with disabled access, were installed by MDC and funded by the Community Group and FTC.

In 2011 and 2012 Frome Town Council adopted its Open Space Strategy and Action Plan. This identified Packsaddle Park as needing improvements to facilities, and as a possible site for FTC acquisition. In 2013, Frome Town Council applied to take over Packsaddle Park and Chapman's Close open space, as well as other areas in Frome, but Mendip rejected the bid while it was waiting to approve the update to the Play Strategy.

When the Strategy was approved, this did not identify Packsaddle Park as a priority to invest in, and proposed a 'significant rethink' of the Chapmans Close court due to its location. MDC's Play Strategy, adopted in August 2013 after two sets of research, has not been implemented, largely due to a lack of staff resources.

Packsaddle Community Group have been in discussion with MDC officers for several months to try and progress a new boules pitch, some new swings, tree planting, and a cycle path around the perimeter of the park. The trees have been planted recently. Progress on the other facilities has been slow however, partly due to a lack of staff resources and other priorities, as this park is not a strategic priority for MDC.

But it is a priority for residents to improve community life in that area by having more of a park to go to.

If MDC remain as owners, the long delays in progressing discussions and improvements are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

FTC have worked very well with local residents and local groups on improving Welshmill Park and planning improvements at The Dippy, and the old Showfield, for the whole community. FTC is best placed, as the most local council with a proactive policy of community engagement with local residents and voluntary groups, to prioritise and implement improvements to local parks and open spaces that are important to local residents.

I have discussed informally with MDC's Strategic Assets Manager and Assets Maintenance Officer, the possibility of a transfer of the Packsaddle Park site to FTC. Their feedback has been positive, and officers agreed to consider an application for transfer and to present it for approval by MDC's Corporate Assets Management Group (CAMG) and Cabinet. I do not predict any objections from MDC to the transfer.

The Chapmans Close play area, with its hard court and basketball hoop, could also be a much better place to play, although is constrained by the neighbouring residential properties. While community plans for this area are not developed it seems logical to request that this site be transferred along with the Packsaddle Way site.

Recommendation:

1. Propose to MDC the freehold transfer of the open spaces at Packsaddle Way/Pedlars Grove and Chapman's Close in order to progress the Open Spaces Strategy and help realise the local community's ambitions for their area.
2. Work with the community including Packsaddle Community Group and neighbouring residents on plans to improve the open spaces.