

EXETER CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY
1 SEPTEMBER 2009

TREWS WEIR ALLOTMENTS

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To update Members on the current position in respect of Trews Weir Allotments and to seek Members views on the available options such that the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure can better decide which option to pursue.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Trews Weir allotments are located in the Riverside Valley Park between the river and the flood channel, a map of the area is included as an Appendix. The allotment site has a mixed ownership with the city council effectively 'owning' the land to the south east of the site via a long lease with the remainder of the site being held in private ownership but leased to the council. The Appendix shows the division of the allotment site.

- 2.2 In August 2008 the council received formal notice to quit from the owner of that portion of the site effective from 29 September 2009 as the owner indicated they wished to sell then. Given that the exact nature of the boundary was not clear and that it was not certain that the retained portion of the land could continue as a viable allotment site all tenants were given notice to quit.

- 2.3 Officers met on a number of occasions to consider the options including making an offer for the site and to that end an independent valuation of the site was obtained. The council made two offers for the site one in February 2009 and an increased offer in April 2009. Despite assurances to the contrary the owner sold the allotments to a private bidder in April 2009.

- 2.4 Since that time the council with the full support of the Trews Weir Allotment Association has been negotiating with the new owner of the site on the basis of:

- maintaining the private portion of the site as allotments;
- negotiating to buy a portion of the bought land so as to provide a more sustainable and definite boundary and to mitigate the impact on the plot holders; and
- trying to find alternative plots for any displaced plot holders who did not wish to remain on the private portion of the site.

In addition negotiations are ongoing on the logistics of the handover at the end of this month.

- 2.5 The new owner intends to operate private allotments on the site. The rentals being proposed are much greater than the council currently charges and the site has been heavily promoted. It appears, according to the new owner, that sufficient expressions of interest have been made to fully let the new site, although apparently only one of the existing allotment holders has expressed an interest. An offer from the council for the portion of land between the private and council owned portions of the site

bordered by the path was also rejected. Given the very pronounced difference in cost between what the plot holders now pay, and what the new owner wishes to charge, it has been the Council's position that it would make all reasonable efforts to provide alternative plots for those who chose not to take up the new owner's offer.

- 2.6 Officers from the Parks and Open Spaces service have been investigating the viability of alternative sites in the Valley Park within the vicinity of the current site to locate the displaced plot holders. The respective Heads of Service (for Parks and Open Spaces and for Leisure and Museums) have also 'walked the site' with the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure, Councillor Mitchell to consider the sensitive issue of locating a number of additional allotments in another portion of the Riverside Valley Park.

3. CURRENT POSITION

- 3.1 The investigation of alternative sites can be summarised as follows;

- An extension of the allotment into the community woodland has been explored. It was felt that it would be inappropriate for any extension to result in the unacceptable loss of tree amenity within the woodland so the potential of extension is limited. Trial pits have revealed that the soil is poor and would require additional top soil to be imported, however there remains the possibility that by using top soil from within the retained allotment area available due to the necessary reorganisation of the site a limited number of plots could be provided. This parcel of land has a formal designation as a site of local nature interest.
- A number of alternative sites have also been considered. However these are either currently identified as playing fields thus requiring a protracted approval process to be undertaken to obtain permission for the siting of allotments or contaminated to such an extent that they would require the importation of large quantities of top soil to provide a capping layer. Both type of site would require environmental health and Environment Agency approval and be expensive. The use of a portion of Belle Isle Park was even considered but the contaminants present, such as arsenic, preclude its use even with a substantial capping layer.
- Old allotment sites exist within the Riverside Valley Park, as identified on the Appendix, which it is understood have an extant planning permission for use as allotments. The area identified in the Appendix is currently laid out as meadowland with paths cut through to enable access to the football area and the canal. Clearly there should be no issues in respect of contamination although this would need to be confirmed but equally clearly there would be a considerable loss of visual amenity if the site was to be fenced off, as it would need to be. Screening could be provided along the cycle track and the fence planted to soften the impact but the impact would remain. As Members will be aware considerable resources have been expended over the last few years to improve the Riverside Valley Park and this area has been identified for further improvements at some time in the future if the necessary funding was available.

4. OPTIONS

4.1 It is the view of officers that there are three main options.

Option 1 – do nothing: This would not result in the loss of allotments within the city but would reduce the number the council control resulting in the displacement of up to forty plot holders who hope to be accommodated within the existing allotment provision.

Option 2 – Re-provide a limited number of allotments: By extending into the community woodland adjacent to the existing site it is thought that up to six half plots could be provided within the funding available. The area would require fencing but the visual impact would be minimal as it would appear largely as it is now. However this would still result in the displacement of up to thirty four plot holders and would not be as cost effective as Option 3. This would result in a minimal increase in plots across the city. The ecological effect would be limited, but would include the loss of a substantial hedge.

Option 3 – Re-use the old allotment site: Using the old allotment site would preclude an extension in to the community woodland. It could be brought into use quickly and would accommodate all of those displaced. It would however have to be fenced and would therefore impact on the visual amenity of the Riverside Valley Park. The environmental impact of the site could of course be minimised by ensuring sustainable practices are followed. It would also result in a further increase in plots available within the city, but a loss of currently publicly accessible land.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 References to relevant portions of council strategies have deliberately been avoided as it was thought that it would not be helpful as undoubtedly they would be contradictory.

5.2 The council is therefore faced with a stark choice; should they consider the needs of the displaced plot holders, who have been fully supportive of the council approach to date, over the needs of the users of the Riverside Valley Park.

6. RECOMMENDED

1) That Members consider the options identified in Section 4 above and recommend to Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure their preference

HEAD OF CONTRACTS AND DIRECT SERVICES & HEAD OF LEISURE AND MUSEUMS
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S:PA/LP/ Committee/909SCC2
Date: 25.8.09

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report: