

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

meeting date: TUESDAY 17 OCTOBER 2023
title: RIBCHESTER COMMUNITY ORCHARD
submitted by: ADAM ALLEN DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
principal author: MARK BEVERIDGE HEAD OF CULTURAL AND LEISURE SERVICES

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To seek Committee approval to licence/lease a parcel of council owned land to Ribchester Parish Council. This will allow a local group to establish a community orchard.
- 1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities
 - Community Objectives – To sustain a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley, encompassing our objective to encourage economic development throughout the borough, with a specific emphasis on tourism.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Council has received a request from Ribchester Ecology and Flood Group to plant a community orchard on Council land alongside the allotments in Ribchester.
- 2.2 A location plan of the Council owned land that is proposed to be licenced/leased is attached to this report at Annex A.
- 2.3 The group have cited the model in Longridge, as the example they wish to follow, where a community orchard was planted in 2022 on Foleys Field.

3. ISSUES

- 3.1 The local group that wish to establish a community orchard in Ribchester are not a constituted body and as such have approached Ribchester Parish Council with a view to them taking on responsibility for the licence/lease of the land.
- 3.2 Ribchester Parish Council already lease the neighbouring allotment land (£557.19 per annum) and we have been informed that the Chair of Ribchester Parish Council has indicated that the parish council would be willing to take on responsibility for the licence/lease to allow the local group to establish an orchard.
- 3.3 The land is currently cut by the Council's grounds maintenance staff during the growing season. As would normally be the case, any licence/lease arrangement for this land would then see this work cease and any maintenance responsibilities would fall to Ribchester Parish Council, or through them to the local group. If planted up Council staff would no longer be able to carry that out, because we would not be able to mow around the trees with the ride on machine currently used, without damage to the trees and if we did it with a pedestrian machine the cost to us would be significantly more because of the extra time it would take.
- 3.4 There is a large outbreak of Himalayan Balsam on the riverbank near to the site, which the Borough is seeking to eradicate, however that is going to take 3-4 years due to the growth cycle of the plant and the proximity to the water course there. Though this would not impact directly on the proposal for the orchard.

3.5 The piece of land is accessed via a bridge which is due to be renewed as part of the Council's capital programme. Though that project has seen some delays given the location and proximity of water courses, which require the approval of the Environment Agency prior to any work being designed and beginning. This should not impact on any proposed licence/lease arrangement.

4 THE PROPOSAL

4.1 Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 enables a Local Authority to dispose of land held by it in any manner it wishes provided that the Local Authority achieves the best consideration that can reasonably be expected (except in the case of short-term tenancies).

4.2 If members were to approve the licence/lease of the land, it is proposed that the valuation office be instructed to provide a market rent for the land, and that this then form the basis of the licence/lease.

4.3 It is proposed that the land be licenced/leased to Ribchester Parish Council for between 5-10 years, given that it will take some time to get the orchard established and the trees bearing any fruit.

4.4 Ribchester Parish Council would need to provide any necessary insurances and commitments as it does with the land on which the allotments sit.

5 RISK ASSESSMENT

5.1 The approval of this report may have the following implications.

- Resources – The land could be used as grazing land or an extension to the existing allotment area if required. It is currently used as an amenity area for dog walking as a footpath runs across it. The licence/lease may generate additional income based on the Valuation Office assessment.
- Technical, Environmental and Legal – The land is in the Borough Council's ownership and a legal agreement would need to be drawn up between Borough and Parish for the use of the land.
- Political – No implications identified.
- Reputation – There is no specific reputational issues, though of course the proposal does assist in providing an amenity for local people to be involved with and there is a clear climate benefit from the planting of trees.
- Equality & Diversity – The group is open to all residents, although the area of land may prove challenging to access for some people with mobility issues.

6 RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE

- 6.1 Approve the proposal to licence/lease the land to Ribchester Parish Council to allow a local group to create an orchard, for a period of 5-10 years and at a value to be determined by the Valuation Office.
- 6.2 Delegate the drawing up of the agreement with Ribchester Parish Council to the Director of Community Services in consultation with the Chair of Community Committee.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS – None

For further information please ask for Mark Beveridge, extension 4479.