



St Francis Fields CIC

St Francis Fields – Future Strategy

CIC 24/09

To: Northiam Parish Council

Meeting Date: 13/06/24

Presented by: Jonathan Strong, Director SFF CIC

Summary: The Parish Council has indicated that it is time to review and create a revised strategy for the future of St Francis Fields.

The CIC is starting work on this by considering the opportunities, constraints and threats which will lead to drafting a possible strategy to be presented to and discussed in the first instance at a meeting of the SFF Working Group hopefully in the early Autumn. Suggested revisions will be incorporated prior to the Councillors having an opportunity of considering it and, it is suggested, a period of public consultation before it is finalised.

One of the main areas of concern from residents is the limited access that parishioners currently have to the property. While working up the longer-term draft strategy, the CIC is suggesting some immediate ideas for addressing these concerns and these are set out in this paper for the Council's consideration and comment at its meeting on 13th June 2024. Guidance would be helpful in advance of these matters being discussed at the next SFF Working Group meeting.

Background: Since purchase of the SFF estate by the Parish Council, there have been a number of successes. The permissive footpath across part of the estate has been opened; the Pop-up-Pub – the top request made by residents at the Council's original open days – opened and now in its 4th season; the community orchard planted by the Conservation Society and the Community Produce Garden launched. In the absence of planning consent for changes of use for the land and buildings of the estate, the CIC has been considering achievable ways of increasing community use of SFF and these are summarised below.

Detail: The following are considered to be achievable ways – either in-hand or that could be considered – for increasing community use of the estate:

1. Community Produce Garden: in progress with start-up costs met by a £5k grant from the National Gardens Scheme but requiring support by volunteers from the community.
2. Newt Ponds: in progress with trial pits in place to confirm suitable ground conditions; completion would result in improved biodiversity of the estate and a long-term income to the Council. It is planned to allow access to the ponds via a permissive footpath
3. Natural Burial Ground: the planning application for this is in preparation but it may be sensible for its submission to be delayed until the applications for the stables and hub are ready so that the Planning Authority will be aware of the way that the whole property is intended to be used. S106 funding is available but this will not meet the full capital cost and consideration is needed by the Council as to how the balance will be funded.
4. Secure Dog Walking Area: included in the list of requests from residents at the Council's original open days and previously considered by the CIC. At that time, it was rejected on grounds of the cost of the secure 2m fencing and the organisational difficulties of managing bookings & access on land with no resident manager. The proposal can be reconsidered to see if these can be overcome.

5. Improved public access with possible permissive footpaths across Fields 13 and 14
6. Village Picnic proposed for the August Bank Holiday weekend – see paper CIC 24/10
7. Park Run: the suitability of the estate to provide a local 5k park run probably round Fields 10, 11 and 12 will be investigated. Park runs in the UK now operate at over 500 locations under the aegis of 'parkrun UK' and 'junior parkrun UK'. Their vision is for small events in local communities, each providing a free-to-attend opportunity to engage with physical activity in a supportive environment. This then provides much more than a free, weekly, timed run through bringing people together to help one-another achieve sustainable and healthy lifestyle changes. Costs should be covered by sponsorship. Should a 5k park run not be feasible, suggestions have been made for fitness and/or bike trails and these could be considered.
8. Archery, pétanque, tennis etc: The sand schools could provide suitable areas for sports for which there is no other public provision in the village. Sports such as archery and pétanque, could be simply and temporarily accommodated whereas tennis courts would require significant investment.

Finance: Not available at this stage. Costings would be provided in the project proposals considered to be worth taking forward by the SFF Working Group.

Key dates: Tabled at the June NPC meeting following preliminary discussion at the 4 Jun SFF Working Group meeting (no decision required).

Other considerations:

The CIC believes that suggestions 6, 7 and 8 as occasional uses, can be achieved under the 28 day permitted development rules without the need for planning permission for change of use.

Proposals for the future use of the stables (in respect of which Batcheller Monkhouse has been instructed to advise) and for the conversion of rooms around the Hub into workshops & offices etc. are contingent on the success of the Change of Use planning applications.