

Solution close for blocked footpath row

Thatcham Town Council to investigate securing long-term control of the alleyway to Memorial Playing Fields

CONCERNS about a blocked footpath in Thatcham have rumbled on for almost a year now.

But Thatcham Town Council may have a solution to please all parties, we can exclusively reveal.

The access from Beverley Close to the Memorial Playing Fields has been blocked by a fence constructed by the Thatcham Memorial Foundation on health and safety grounds since last May.

The decision sparked strong opposition from some residents and remains a hot topic.

One councillor has described the enduring saga as a "game of never-ending snakes and ladders, forever landing on snake squares", while another wished the issue "could have been resolved sooner".

It was even mentioned at the mayor of Thatcham's recent Civic Awards.

But TTC took a step towards a solution when it "agreed to investigate it securing long-term control of the alleyway" at its finance and general purposes committee on Monday, February 28.

The finer legal and financial details were discussed in Part 2 of the meeting, which means press and public were excluded.

But emails shared with the



The fence closing off the footpath

Newbury Weekly News by a Beverley Close resident show TTC is considering purchasing the path from its current owner using Community Infrastructure Levy funds from the Lower Way housing development—of which roughly £20,000 is available.

The town council would have five years to spend the funds before these could be recalled by the developer.

Councillor Iain Cottingham (Lib Dem, Thatcham Central), also a nominated trustee at the Memorial Foundation, became the main point of contact

regarding this issue following a heated public meeting last October.

On April 25, he wrote to the resident: "Initially, I hoped WBC would adopt the alleyway as a footpath, but unfortunately it isn't wide enough to comply as a footpath."

"TTC will undertake a process of legal due diligence to purchase the alleyway."

"When the legal process is complete, an offer will be made to the identified owners of the alleyway."

"Once in the ownership of TTC, the alleyway will be

repaired to a state that removes the H&S [health and safety] risk identified by TMF's independent consultants, thus facilitating the removal of the

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Iain Cottingham: 'TTC will undertake a process of legal due diligence to purchase the alleyway'

fence preventing access.

"TMF trustees will have their own approval process to remove the fence."

"TTC anticipate the alleyway will remain open and be maintained by TTC."

Regarding the use of CIL funds, he added: "Hopefully, there will be no or marginal cost to council tax payers of Thatcham to the proposed plan."

On April 21, the then TTC leader Tom McCann (Lib Dem, Thatcham Central) had also reassured the resident: "If we can help to resolve these issues,

we as a town council would be very willing to offer help in reopening the path."

The *Newbury Weekly News* understands while some confusion still exists about the owner, confirming this is not necessarily essential to securing control of the path.

Further debate surrounds whether the path is a public right of way (PROW).

It isn't listed as one on WBC's Definitive Map and Statement (2019).

But this doesn't mean it wasn't one in the past, as evidence of forgotten or historic PROW does surface, according to WBC's website.

If not, the public may still be able to access private land that has been in use for at least 20 years and nobody has told them to stop.

Most of the bungalows in Beverley Close were built in the 1950s.

The footpath concerned was added in 1980 when eight bungalows were built to the north of the street.

This paper approached councillors Cottingham and McCann for further comment, but neither wished to add anything at this stage.

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