

Appendix 5: Resident Correspondence on Canonsgrove

The Council received two letters of complaint in February since Christmas with respect to Canonsgrove and two letters from SWT councillors. These are included below with responses where provided.

The Parish Council 'Canonsgrove Sub-group' also undertook a survey and the responses to this are summarised in this Appendix along with a representation from an ex-statistics teacher living in Trull, questioning the statistical validity of the survey.

Representation from Trull Resident, dated 5/2/21

I wish to make a formal complaint regarding the councils actions in allowing the continuation of the highly inappropriate homeless and rehabilitation encampment at Canonsgrove, Trull, a rural residential area.

As a long standing member of the local community, I have been dismayed by the lack of respect shown to the local population, the lack of governance and due diligence shown by the council and the inattention to due process and planning law consultation.

I request written confirmation of receipt of this complaint and confirmation that it will be duly considered, circulated and included in the ongoing decision making process regarding the future of the encampment. I understand that today is the last day for correspondence to be included in the March meeting.

I would like to highlight that the chief reason for my complaint is that my 3 young children have been subject to the most appalling and inappropriate sights and situations involving the residents of the encampment. I would not expect to have seen the prevalence of this type of behaviour in either inner city London or Bristol, where there is a significant police presence. The action to burden an ill-equipped rural community with the complex and dangerous issues that have been demonstrated by the inhabitants of the facility, is highly inappropriate.

I am completely outraged that as a local resident, at no stage have I been formally consulted in any way by the Council on this matter. The first correspondence to residents requesting consultation was a survey on behalf of the parish council last week. This confirms to me that there is a gross disregard for the local community and the absence of any governance, or independent audit of the process.

The local population appear to have been deliberately misled by the council that the encampment was intended an emergency measure only. This now appears to be a gross misrepresentation of the situation and an abuse of powers.

There is a clear difficulty faced by residents to accurately express their views for fear of appearing unsympathetic to the plight of the vulnerable and 'primary homeless'. The council has actively exploited this by not holding appropriate public consultation. I therefore request that the elected councillors now whistleblow on this very poor and underhand performance by the council.

The following response was provided on 9/2/21 to this complaint with further information provided to a follow up email from the complainant.

Dear Sir

I am the lead officer on the Homeless work and have overseen the project at Canonsgrove.

Firstly, to explain that the site was set up following the direct requirement of the Prime Minister to get 'everyone in'. We had little more than 48 hours to respond to this and therefore no consultation with the community outside of letting the parish councillors know, was possible. We continue to receive instructions from the government to ensure we are accommodating all homeless and rough sleepers, including a letter from the Secretary of State in January. The Council is now considering how we can find the best accommodation solution for these people on an ongoing basis to avoid having to put them back onto the streets once the Covid risks have diminished.

I would like to give assurance that there is no presumption that Canonsgrove will be established as a permanent site and there never has been. We received an email from the 'Trull Residents Group' raising this matter which was read out at our Community Scrutiny meeting on the 4th November and I include an extract of my response to this letter which remains the case:

"I can give you my assurance that the Council is approaching the Options Appraisal exercise with objectivity and integrity and there is no pre-determination that Canonsgrove is our preferred option."

We will be in a position to say whether Canonsgrove will be part of our longer-term plans or not within the report that will go to Scrutiny on 3rd March and Executive on 17th March. Of course to reach this position, we will have considered a wide range of issues around the suitability of the site. We have also received a number of representations from people from Trull who do not wish this facility to be continued at Canonsgrove and this has been noted and considered within the work we are doing.

The Council would not and is not ignoring the representations from Trull residents. We respond to all correspondence and we answer all the questions set by the Trull Residents Group, where we are able to and we attend the Trull Parish Council meeting every month. We have been consistently very clear with the Trull Residents Group and Trull Parish Council that there is not and never has been a presumption that Canonsgrove will be part of the long-term solution however it is one of the options that is being considered. We also circulate a newsletter every month, posting this locally to neighbouring properties and sending it to local residents who have expressed an interest. Please let me know if you would like me to include you on this circulation.

As explained above the recommendation to Executive on this will be shared in the papers for Scrutiny on 3rd March and these papers will be available on our website around a week prior to this meeting.

In response to your direct questions, yes we will ensure that this representation is shared with members of the Scrutiny Committee and as outlined above, a wide range of issues will be considered within the decision-making process.

Simon Lewis

Assistant Director Housing and Communities Somerset West and Taunton Council

A further follow-up email was received from the complainant saying they were still unsatisfied and asking for more clarity on 2 issues. This was responded to as follows:

Dear Sir

I understand from your reply below that you will be passing your complaint onto the Local Government Ombudsman as you are unsatisfied with my response.

Just to provide clarity to the further two questions you have highlighted.

Firstly we were unaware that the use of the site breached an existing Section 106 agreement at the time of establishing the site and this had not been picked up by our Planning section when they reviewed this. A letter has been sent to the Trull Residents Group from the Planning section apologising for this oversight. We are currently working with Bridgwater and Taunton College to submit a variation order to this Section 106 agreement to the Council, which will be considered by the Planning Committee. The Planning Section is aware of this breach but is not taking enforcement action as it is aware that this variation order is being submitted for their consideration.

With respect to public consultation. We are engaging with the Parish Council monthly, sending out monthly letters to the community and responding to all questions from the Trull Residents Group and the parish council subgroup on Canonsgrove, so are trying to keep Trull residents updated. We are not yet in a position to consult on anything meaningful until after the Options Appraisal goes to Executive in March. We don't have an alternative ready site to move existing Canonsgrove residents on to at this present time and the government is clear that they do not want us to close the site and make everyone homeless again, particularly during national lockdown and whilst Covid-19 is a significant risk to the health of rough sleepers.

There is nothing underhand and opportunistic taking place. Canonsgrove was not planned but was established at very short notice as a result of a national emergency. With respect to the 'what next', I can only repeat the position of myself and the Council which we have been very consistent about "I can give you my assurance that the Council is approaching the Options Appraisal exercise with objectivity and integrity and there is no pre-determination that Canonsgrove is our preferred option."

I hope that you will include this response as part of your complaint to the Ombudsman.

Representation from Trull Resident, dated 4/2/21

I wanted to, again, submit this, concerning the Temporary Homeless Settlement at Cannonsgrove to you as I can't seem to get any response from our elected representatives.

I write to voice my very strong objection to the proposed establishment of a permanent homeless settlement at Canonsgrove.

I like many had no objection to the use of Canonsgrove as an **emergency shelter** for the first emergency lock down, it was a reasonable measured humanitarian emergency response. It should not be used to circumvent due process, establish a permanent settlement nor be taken as having wide community support.

My Objections are:

- Trull residents have been subject to crime and anti social behaviour and feel unsafe.
- There is no **evidence** that a larger out of Town facility is **appropriate nor effective**.
- The option appraisal has had no external input nor moderation.
- We shouldn't be setting up a a large facility out of town, It's inappropriate.
- Canonsgrove is not a suitable site. It is too removed from the Town centre and it lacks facilities to support the homeless.
- Establishing a 60 unit site creates a homeless settlement , surely they need to be managed back into main stream society not shut away in a rural location.
- There is poor public local transport
- By establishing and expanding the facility you are simply increasing demand with homeless coming to Taunton from elsewhere.
- Canonsgrove houses students, nurses and doctors. It should not be used for the homeless.
- The homeless facility if required should be small , centrally located and have sustained support and supervision.
- Onward housing is the responsibility of SWTD as with other cases of need. Cannonsgrove isn't a suitable permanent settlement.
- Facilities should be close to a GP Surgery and Pharmacy.
- A more suitable location would be an industrial site close to the centre of Taunton, or the YMCA in the centre of Taunton is the ideal location or the Taunton Deane offices where the police station is sited.
- There already exists a 27 bedded facility in taunton and Alms House in Trull and Taunton. There is no evidence that provision beyond this level is required.
- Some users have been rowdy and disruptive walking along the Honition road. Fights have broken out and the police have had to attend.

I echo many opinions of local residents and strongly object to its use being formalised and expanded, it is incremental creep. I know many have written to the Trull residents group and parish council and MP.

Residents do not want this facility in Canonsgrove.

We do not expect to **elect and fund** our council to

- ignore our representations and objections , nor
- waste our council tax funds , nor
- adversely affect our peace and quiet and
- disrupt our village life
- Or to compromise our and our childrens safety.

This (your) proposal does not have local community support and residents are very concerned about SW&T conduct and mission creep.

It appears SWT are not listening to local residents, they are they are ignoring our objections

I would be grateful if you would:

1. That you receive this.
2. Take note of further action and accept this as a formal notice of complaint
2. That this be read at the meeting.
4. That you note, record and represent the very great concern and opposition to the conduct of SW&T and of the establishment of a Homeless settlement at Cannonsgrove

The following response was provided on 5/2/21 to this complaint

Dear Sir

I am the lead officer on the Homeless work and Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts has therefore asked that I respond to your email below. I also understand that you have sent some emails to others copied in, hence my wish to share this response with them.

Firstly I would like to give assurance that there is no presumption that Canonsgrove will be established as a permanent site and there never has been. We received an email from the 'Trull Residents Group' raising this matter which was read out at our Community Scrutiny meeting on the 4th November and I include an extract of my response to this letter which remains the case:

"I can give you my assurance that the Council is approaching the Options Appraisal exercise with objectivity and integrity and there is no pre-determination that Canonsgrove is our preferred option."

Due to the timescales we have not been able to undertake a detailed assessment of all available sites that could be chosen, but we will be in a position to say whether Canonsgrove will be part of our longer-term plans or not within the report that will go to Scrutiny on 3rd March and Executive on 17th March. Of course to reach this position, we will have considered a wide range of issues around the suitability of the site. We have also received a number of representations from people from Trull who

do not wish this facility to be continued at Canonsgrove and this has been noted and considered within the work we are doing.

The Council would not and is not ignoring the representations from Trull residents. We respond to all correspondence and answer all the questions set by the Trull Residents Group, where we are able to and we attend the Trull Parish Council meeting every month. We have been consistently very clear with the Trull Residents Group and Trull Parish Council that there is not and never has been a presumption that Canonsgrove will be part of the long-term solution however it is one of the options that is being considered.

As explained above the recommendation to Executive on this will be shared in the papers for Scrutiny on 3rd March and these papers will be available on our website around a week prior to this meeting.

With respect to the 4 points you raise in your email:

- Yes we have received this*
- Noted*
- I will request this be read at the Scrutiny meeting*
- We will ensure this is reflected in the paper written to Scrutiny.*

Finally I would like to give assurance that we only accommodate people who have a local connection to our District. We are not under obligation to house those from outside of Somerset West and Taunton, (except for rare exceptions such as those fleeing domestic abuse and some other exceptional situations) and therefore we only accommodate those who qualify.

Simon Lewis

Assistant Director Housing and Communities Somerset West and Taunton Council

Representation from Cllrs Farbahi, Nicholls, Wedderkopp and Martin Hill dated 11/2/21.

Homeless and rough sleepers are very vulnerable to coronavirus; they are more likely to have underlying health conditions than the wider population, increasing the risk of transmission of the virus.

On 26 March 2020, the Government asked local authorities in England to “**help make sure we get everyone in**”, including those who would not normally be entitled to assistance under homelessness legislation.

In response, Somerset West and Taunton (SWT) Council sought to ensure that people sleeping rough and in accommodation where it was difficult to self-isolate (such as shelters and assessment centres) were safely accommodated to protect them, and the wider public, from the risks of Covid-19. In SWT we had to come up with a temporary safe and secure place within 48 hours and Cannonsgrove was the only viable short-term option.

The Council welcomed the additional emergency funding to help them respond to the Covid-19 outbreak. However, the level of funding for homelessness services remains a concern. Any solutions must take into account the sustainability of the required long-term funding. The LGA has criticised the fragmented, short-term and resource-intensive competitive nature of current funding and called for long-term and sustainable homelessness funding.

The shortage of suitable move-on accommodation in many areas of the county remains a significant problem. Furthermore, there are fears that homelessness levels may surge once the Government's temporary coronavirus housing, welfare and employment support measures come to an end and the full economic impact of the Covid-19 outbreak starts to take effect.

It is regrettable that, when central government came up with this measure, they failed to mandate that local government should consult with the affected and wider community.

However, the scrutiny meeting on 4 November 2020 resolved "any option appraisal should look at all possible locations and types of accommodation across the district". We believe this is an essential prerequisite before deciding on any sites.

Before making a rushed decision, we need to look for medium to long term sustainable solutions to prevent homelessness.

Initially, local residents in Trull and Comeytrove came out to support vulnerable people in our community whilst a more sustainable strategy to include the resident's and Parish council views was formulated.

While Cannonsgrove provided an acceptable short-term solution, it does not support independent living. Smaller specialized sites could well provide better independent living conditions than large building miles away from the amenities of the town Centre. At the moment there is too much reliance on services such as police being called out to deal with violence, sexual and public order offences, drugs and antisocial behavior.

We cannot and should not ignore local residents' anxiety and concerns since last March regarding Cannonsgrove. Resident's concerns should be listened to constructively and meaningfully. The community, the Parish and local councillors remain concerned that the Council seems to regard Cannonsgrove as the silver bullet to society's bigger problem. This is not the case. The council should seriously consider other sites that are closer to facilities such as GP surgeries, pharmacies, Job centers, DWP and supermarkets as well as other services provided by charities working to help homeless people, and indeed the local police should trouble arise.

Cannonsgrove is in rural community and isolated from major services, it is quite simply in the wrong place to care for these vulnerable people.

We hope that the council and the executives will take on board the findings of recent Trull Parish council survey and act accordingly.

We cannot agree with the council/executives on this occasion and request that more research is undertaken to find other more suitable sites and that the use of Cannonsgrove for long-term rough and homeless accommodation is taken out of option appraisal.

A response was not provided to this at the time (apart from acknowledgement of receipt and confirmation that this would be included in the Scrutiny report.)

Representation from Cllr Sarah Wakefield dated 28/1/21.

I am writing in my capacity as ward member for Trull and as a resident of the local area for some 28 years. Whilst I applaud SWT's swift and decisive reaction to the Everyone In policy of the government - by identifying the Canonsgrove Student accommodation in Staplehay as being both available and suitable for single self isolating people and, with the help of the YMCA, in setting it up in very short order back in March 2020 - I wish to add to the matters being considered in the Options Appraisal my view as to the unsuitability of Canonsgrove for longer term use.

I would make the following points:

1. The use of the Canonsgrove student accommodation was no more and no less than an *ad hoc* emergency reaction to the Everyone In government policy for the first lockdown, which has been extended as the Covid pandemic has continued and further government support and funding has been made available. Its initial purpose of providing a safe haven for single homeless and rough sleepers remains and continues to be legitimate while the pandemic risks remain particularly acute for this group of vulnerable people.
2. The current Options Appraisal considering the future of homeless and rough sleepers in SWT district and with it the longer term use of Canonsgrove for this purpose has grown out of the initial short term solution to a particular issue – the Covid 19 pandemic. That initial short term solution clearly does not and cannot amount to what should be a considered and properly devised plan considering all options for providing a more permanent solution to the future of single homeless and rough sleepers in SWT. Seeking to build policy on short-term solutions such as this is not and can never be the proper way to formulate policy.
3. To the extent that the temporary accommodation has been 'successful' in reaching and helping (some of) this group (and many stories of such success have been published and circulated) this has happened at a time when this group of people have been housed and for much of the time been required to be locked down (in common with the rest of the population). What evidence is there, if any, that such an approach would or could work when people are not obliged to remain indoors and *in situ*? There cannot be any real evidence on which to base any decision about the use of this particular location and setting while the pandemic continues. I submit that any decision should be shelved until a proper appraisal of the use of Canonsgrove as an appropriate site can be made when the country is no longer locked down or movement restricted.

4. The Canonsgrove student accommodation as a whole (for over 150 students) is in any event far too large for such longer term use - even now it involves the mixing of long term homeless and rough sleepers with the short term and suddenly homeless together with other occupants – medical staff from the local hospital. The site as a whole could house far more than the 50 or so homeless and rough sleepers who are there now and risks either being much underused or simply overwhelmed with any numbers much above that figure kept in one place.
5. It surely cannot be right even to consider the setting up of what would effectively be an institution for dealing with the issue of homelessness and rough sleeping in the district. The whole thrust of social policy for the last 30-40 years has been to move away from putting large groups of people into this sort of institutional setting even where there are more and varied activities and support services on offer. The question must be asked as to why is it even being considered as appropriate now?
6. Other Councils such as Bath and Dorset are using their resources to acquire in town accommodation to convert to house the homeless and rough sleepers in small flats or studio accommodation to give them the homes that they need and should have. Being put in a hostel style setting such as Canonsgrove is only appropriate during a national emergency like the pandemic or possibly in the short term for those suddenly made homeless where no other suitable accommodation is available.
7. The homeless and rough sleepers are not an homogenous group and the individuals need and deserve different levels of care and assistance. Recent single homeless may just need accommodation and help with finding a home until they can move on. Other longer term homeless and rough sleepers may need help from multiple agencies. This level of help and support in normal (non pandemic) times would be far better provided in a town centre setting where many would most likely be happier to reside. Surely the reason that Bridgwater and Taunton College no longer use the halls of residence for their students is at least in part due to their distance from the town and lack of other nearby local facilities and transport into town – buses being infrequent.
8. Some Canonsgrove residents have had to walk the nearly 3 miles into Taunton town to access services, shops and friends they want to see. This distance from the town centre is not fair on them – some of whom do not enjoy good health and are frail - or the local community. There are no public toilets *en route* (leading to issues for some) and some may not be capable of making this journey in a sober state causing issues for other pedestrians and danger for traffic on the road (by walking in it for example).
9. There is much concern and disquiet (and in some cases genuine fear and anger) in the local community about the issues which have occurred in their locality since March 2019 and as a direct result of the use of Canonsgrove. Although their views are represented by a few who speak for the many – it is neither fair nor reasonable to seek to dismiss what they are saying as simply the vociferous complaining few. Many local people are and have been supportive of the emergency use of Canonsgrove as a reaction to the pandemic and indeed have offered help and support. That does not mean that they or others in the community would support its longer term use once the pandemic is over.

10. The local community and myself are extremely concerned about the Canonsgrove property being acquired by SWT for longer term use and about negotiations which may or may not be being held with the owner of Canonsgrove. It should be the case that other sites are properly considered for example the Royal Ashton Hotel, Flook House, any other larger houses, hotels or buildings in the town centre – some of which may only become available in the coming months as businesses and shops close and move due to financial hardship. To seek to acquire Canonsgrove in the ‘hope’ (without evidence) that homeless and rough sleepers will either want or agree to go and stay there outside pandemic regulations is frankly unrealistic.
11. Reports from police and other agencies within the site do not accord with the actual experience of people living along the Trull Road and near Canonsgrove. Anti-social behaviour (including drunkenness and drug dealing) takes many forms and not all are actionable in law or are matters which the authorities are either particularly interested in or are capable of being properly recorded by those authorities. However, these behaviours can be and are very upsetting and disruptive for members of this peaceful local community who have chosen to live in a place some way from the town centre where law abiding and respectful behaviour predominates. This community is used to rural village life and should not have to face or accept the behaviours and challenges more expected and tolerated in the inner city as exhibited by some residents at Canonsgrove.

In conclusion, it is my firm view as set out in the points above that such behaviours and challenges should not be imposed upon local residents by the unilateral action of SWT, that Canonsgrove by its location is the wrong place (being too far from the town centre) and has no track record of ‘success’ in dealing with this problem outside the Covid pandemic restrictions either and that to set up any institution on this scale as short term accommodation would fly in the face of established public policy.

A response was not provided to this at the time (apart from acknowledgement of receipt and confirmation that this would be included in the Scrutiny report.)

Trull Residents Survey

Trull Parish Council ‘Canonsgrove Subgroup’ submitted a survey to residents in Trull in February asking whether they wanted Homeless accommodation to continue in Trull or elsewhere. The introduction letter to this survey and the survey itself is included below and did not reflect the Council’s position which had been clearly and repeatedly stated to the Trull Parish Council at monthly meetings by officers. The letter instead insinuated to Trull residents that the Council was planning a site at Canonsgrove with homeless provision three times the size that it currently is.

The covering letter for the survey is attached as **Appendix 5a**

The survey was sent to 900 people with a return rate of around 25% and 219 valid responses.

The summary of results from the survey and comments received are provided in the appendices:

Appendix 5b: Overview of survey from Trull Parish Council

Appendix 5c: Statistical results of survey

Appendix 5d: Comments from respondees

New paragraph added to Appendix 5 on 26/2/21 to add new representation received before 4pm deadline.

We also received a separate representation from an ex-teacher of statistics, living in Trull who thought it important to point out to the Scrutiny Committee “in the spirit of informing debate” that the survey was biased negatively against Canonsgrove, “the survey appeared to be designed to achieve the outcome of rejection of the use of Canonsgrove” and had a number of statistical anomalies in how it was conducted and how the conclusions were drawn. He submitted his findings to the Trull Parish Council and Trull Working Group prior to publication. This is shown as Appendix 5e.

The outcomes from the survey are summarised as follows:

Less than 1% supported “A sizeable hub model at Canonsgrove requiring a 6 mile round trip to essential services.”

26.5% supported “A sizeable hub model centrally located in Taunton close to services and community.”

32.4% supported “Smaller multi-occupancy accommodation dispersed across Taunton”

29.7% supported “Housing First Model: clients immediately placed in their own accommodation and provided with wrap-around support. Recognised as being particularly successful with more complex needs clients.”

A thorough analysis of the responses has not yet been undertaken, however it is encouraging that the findings of this survey align to a large degree with the recommendations of the Council’s Accommodation Strategy.

The Accommodation Strategy seeks a greater mix of provision moving forward, with some hub accommodation, some dispersed accommodation and some Housing First along with a range of other provision.