

Appendix 1 Submission from Otterford Parish Council

OTTERFORD PARISH COUNCIL

OTTERFORD B: AN UPDATE OF THE COUNCIL'S POSITION - OCTOBER 2019

1. The Site

1.1 'Otterford B' is a field in Culmhead, (still?) owned by SCC. It is immediately adjacent to the Otterford A permanent gypsy/traveller site.

2. Otterford Parish Council Position

2.1 In October 2013 the Parish Council ended its interest in acquiring the site

2.2 The Parish Council agreed in 2012 that any additional temporary or permanent pitches needed in the TDBC area should be sourced and located in other areas/ parishes.

- > with 15 permanent pitches already in the parish, Otterford hosted an exceptionally high percentage of pitches in TDBC in 2011 (unlikely to have changed substantially, although not updated)
- > with no local facilities, and almost non-existent public transport, Culmhead is not a suitable location for additional gypsy/traveller pitches

3. The Attempt to Acquire the Site in 2011/12/13

3.1 In 2011 the Parish Council expressed an interest in acquiring Otterford B from SCC under the Community Asset Transfer scheme (introduced in the Localism Act 2011). At that time our outline intention was to create a Community Diamond Jubilee Orchard - to be opened during the Diamond Jubilee weekend as part of a large programme of activities organised jointly with Buckland St Mary Parish Council (in SSDC).

3.2 In December 2011 SCC wrote to the Parish Council enclosing draft Heads of Terms for a possible transfer. The Parish Council responded to this on 18th February 2012.

3.3 After that there was absolutely no response from SCC - not even an acknowledgment for eight months - until someone on Cllr David Huxtable's behalf emailed on 10th September 2013 to (finally) advise "SCC have been liaising with another party who has shown an interest in acquiring the site. When all of the necessary information regarding this has been made available to us, we will be in a position to weigh up both expressions of interest and come to a final decision."

3.4 Cllr John Williams the ex-Leader of TDBC attended our Parish Council meeting on 10th September 2013 to talk about Otterford B and (per the minutes) 'emphasised that TDBC were not in detailed negotiations with SCC to acquire the site'.

3.5 From both principal authorities, who was trying to fool who? Who was being very economical with the truth? By that time it didn't really matter. Our original request had dragged on for almost two years, the Diamond Jubilee was long gone, and it appeared that neither SCC nor TDBC were willing to be honest to us. The following month - October 2013 - we ended our interest in acquiring the site.

4. Otterford - Not a Suitable Location for Additional Pitches

4.1 A copy of the Parish Council's Statement of December 2013 is attached. This explains why we thought (and continue to think) no further pitches should be located in Culmhead/Otterford. To the earlier points raised we would now add concerns about density of pitches.

4.2 Spreading The Provision. From our Statement you will note that Otterford's population was 0.35% of the TDBC total population: pitches already in Otterford were 13.89% of the total number of pitches in TDBC. There has been no time to locate any more recent figures or update other information, but the number of pitches in Otterford remain unchanged, and it is extremely unlikely that a huge increase in numbers elsewhere has dramatically changed the earlier position.

4.3 Pitch Density. From at least the 1980s onwards central government, and bodies such as the former Housing Corporation, have urged - and sometimes required - local authorities and housing associations not to overdevelop any one

'type' of housing in any one area, and to ensure that community facilities are available or co-developed with any new housing. Although primarily targeted at social housing developments this should be seen as applying equally to the provision of gypsy and traveller pitches (sometimes considered part of the social housing supply). The SCC-sponsored de Montfort University report *Somerset Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment* in 2010 showed the preference of many gypsies and travellers was for a site with 10 or fewer pitches (Page 76). There are already 13 pitches at Otterford A.

4.4 Local Facilities & Transport. The position regarding lack of facilities and poor public transport has, in fact, deteriorated since 2011/12. There are still no local facilities - schools, shops, POs, GP surgeries or churches - within walking distance or served by public transport. There remains one daily weekday return bus service to Taunton (for a very long day in the town!) from Churchinford Road, but the Sidmouth/Taunton bus service (from the same location) has reduced to just two weekday return services to Taunton per week.

5. Looking Forward

5.1 The Parish Council would welcome the opportunity to see and understand

- > the current population of SWATDC, and of Otterford Parish.
- > the current number of approved gypsy/traveller pitches (permanent and, separately, temporary) in SWATDC - broken down to show 'host parishes'.
- > the current level of demand for permanent pitches, and (separately) temporary pitches
- > areas requested by gypsy/traveller households applicants - again split to show which requests are for temporary pitches and which are for permanent pitches.

5.2 If we understand correctly TDBC/SWATDC has looked continually for land for additional sites/pitches over the last 7-8 years without any success - but has limited the search to land already owned (or owned by SCC), or land voluntarily offered by landowners. Given the level of statutory demand we understand SWATDC is facing we are surprised that no thought has been given to using Compulsory Purchase Orders to acquire suitable land for pitches. We hope SWATDC will now do so - this would allow a spread of sites/pitches, and give

the Council the opportunity to consider addressing demand/need in the areas requested.

**OTTERFORD PARISH COUNCIL
A STATEMENT**

Otterford B – Gypsy & Travellers’ Site

In November 2011, when we first heard that Somerset County Council (SCC) was planning to dispose of this site, Otterford Parish Council expressed an interest in acquiring it under the Community Asset Transfer scheme (introduced in the Localism Act 2011). At that time our outline intention was to create a Community Diamond Jubilee Orchard – keeping the site as public space for the use and enjoyment of parishioners and others.

Soon after that we became aware that Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) might also be interested in acquiring the site, for use as another gypsy and traveller site (for which it has had temporary planning permission for the last several years, although just about never used).

We were much concerned about this. Not only did we want to acquire the site, we equally did not want to see another gypsy and traveller site in Otterford (the Otterford A site next door has 13 pitches, and there are 2 at Daneswell).

TDBC statistics provided in 2012 show there are a total of 108 permanent pitches, plus 23 transit pitches at Stoneyhead, in Taunton Deane.

Summarised, this indicates:

- > **Otterford’s % of pitches in TDBC, excluding transit, is 15 out of 108 = 13.89%**
- > Otterford’s % of pitches in TDBC, including transit, is 15 out of 131 = 11.45%

And comparing populations:

- > We believe Otterford’s population is approximately 385 (298 on Register of Electors 2012, plus vacant properties, plus children)
- > TDBC population is 110,187 (2011 Census)
- > **Otterford’s population as a % of TDBC population is $(385 \div 110,187 \times 100) = 0.35\%$**

Thus Otterford, a small rural parish in the heart of the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, is providing nearly 14% of the permanent pitches in Taunton Deane: our permanent resident population (including those gypsy and traveller households living in Otterford A and Daneswell) is just 0.35% of Taunton Deane’s population.

36 of the 49 parishes in Taunton Deane appear to have no provision for gypsies and travellers whatsoever.

We believed it was not logical for TDBC to consider placing yet more pitches in Otterford, given the AONB and the total lack of facilities. This lack of facilities means that sites here are simply not in the interest of travellers - present and future. There are no schools, shops, post-offices, GP surgeries or churches within walking distance; and there is only very occasional public transport close-by. TDBC appeared to be targeting Otterford simply because it is an easy option.

We must stress this is not simply a case of ‘NIMBYism’. We were/are not complaining about the existing Otterford A site or Daneswell – they have been in existence for some years now and residents are as involved with local parish matters as they want to be. Over the last few months, in consultation with Somerset Country Parks Ltd who own Otterford A, residents on both sites have been invited to contribute to the first Otterford Parish Plan.

So we first asked to acquire the site in November 2011. In the intervening time we believe we have frequently been largely ignored by both TDBC and SCC when we have tried to pursue the matter – bureaucratic, neutral and

sometimes unhelpful responses were received weeks later (sometimes only after chasing), information from either SCC or TDBC sometimes contradicted what the other was saying etc. Throughout there was never a willing, open and constructive dialogue.

One SCC response – to our letter replying to the draft Heads of Terms they offered us – took almost 8 months!! **YES – SCC ACTUALLY GOT AS FAR AS SENDING US DRAFT HEADS OF TERMS FOR US TO ACQUIRE THE SITE, ONLY TO COMPLETELY IGNORE OUR REPLY FOR NEARLY EIGHT MONTHS AND THEN SELL IT TO ANOTHER ORGANISATION!!**

On 5th November 2013 – exactly two years after we first expressed an interest in acquiring the site – TDBC agreed, in a confidential meeting, to purchase it. A month earlier we had concluded that, whilst we still wished to acquire the site, there was little point in continuing to pursue the issue actively; we were simply not going to win. As a very small Parish Council with limited resources we simply had to spend our time more productively.

We are pleased to acknowledge that Councillor David Reed (our Taunton Deane Borough Councillor) and Councillor Ross Henley (our Somerset County Councillor, who is also a Taunton Deane Borough Councillor for another ward) have supported our position throughout.

We had high hopes of the Localism Act 2011 all dashed.

We believe Somerset County Council and Taunton Deane Borough Council should be ashamed of themselves.

Otterford Parish Council
December 2013