



Queen Camel Parish

DRAFT Minutes of the Parish (Village) Meeting held at 7.30pm on Thursday 6th December 2018 at the Memorial Hall

The Village or Parish meeting (the Meeting) was convened by eleven electors and the Parish Council Chairman John Brendon (JB) who chaired it. Its purpose was to consider the future of the former site of Countess Gytha School (the Site, the Old School site or OSS) and the proposals for it of the Queen Camel Community Land Trust (CLT). The Meeting was attended by c.100 members of the public including CLT Directors, Parish Councillors and the District and County Councillor.

JB opened the Meeting and welcomed members of the public. The Meeting agreed with his suggestion that a good way to start would be for the CLT to outline its proposals for the Site so that everyone would have the same information.

[Note: These minutes are not a verbatim record. Broadly speaking they follow the order in which matters were discussed but some points have been transposed in the interests of coherence and clarity. Contributions by CLT representatives are shown *in italics* and contributions by other residents in ordinary or Roman font].

A CLT representative explained what the CLT Working Group (the CLT) had been doing and made the following points:

- *The CLT thanks everyone who attended the Drop-In Event on 24th November for their interest and many helpful suggestions.*
- *The CLT has not yet decided whether or not to purchase the Site but it is working very hard to gather all the information it needs to make such an important decision.*
- *The CLT will take note of all comments and observations made by those attending the Parish Meeting and these will contribute to its due diligence.*
- *The CLT's proposals for the Old School Site are in line with the Development Brief set out in successive drafts of the Parish Council's Neighbourhood Plan and displayed at successive Village Meetings and Drop-In Events.*
- *It was the Parish Council that registered the Site as an Asset of Community Value.*
- *Last year the CLT's plans were put on hold for over nine months while the Site owners, Somerset County Council (SCC), first considered and then abandoned an alternative plan before inviting the CLT to renew its expression of interest.*
- *In February 2018 SCC offered the CLT the Site at a discounted price of £250k., substantially below the auction guide price of £400k., on account of the CLT's plans to offer some Adult Social Care and Children's Services at the Site.*
- *At a high-level meeting in June 2018 SCC repeatedly confirmed this offer, subject to the sale being completed by March 2019.*
- *With professional help (funded by a £14k. grant) the CLT completed a feasibility study and is developing a business plan. These indicate that with the 75% occupancy rate the CLT is aiming for the business units would generate £15k.-£20k. pa. to reinvest in the Property.*
- *The CLT has got through the first stage of a Community Business Fund (CBF) - Power To Change grant application and is waiting to be assessed for the second stage. If the application fails the CLT will withdraw its bid and SCC will put the Site up for auction.*

- *The proposed South Somerset District Council (SSDC) loan is just a 'backstop' or bridging loan to be used only if the CLT wins a CBF grant but payment is delayed beyond the end of March.*
- *If the bid goes ahead the CLT will also be raising funds through share options.*
- *The CLT has recently received a comprehensive building and site Survey and will shortly be discussing it with the professional firm of architects and surveyors who produced it.*
- *The CLT has been in continuous discussion with SSDC Planners about a Change of Use which would allow the Site to be used for artisan units and as a wellbeing centre.*
- *Under the CLT plans there should be no more motor traffic to and from the Site than when it was a school: tenants will park in an inner car park and visitors in the outer car park.*
- *The CLT is conscious of the (c.1 in 33 years) danger of flooding but unlike the school it would mitigate the risk with special flood barriers and doors and non-return valves on the toilets.*
- *The current grant-funded CLT survey is intended to identify needs which could be met at the Site. The independent professional organisation conducting the survey expects to report the results in January 2019.*
- *The CLT has always passed on as much information as it can but in recent months its main focus has necessarily been on fund-raising and developing its plans.*
- *The CLT Working Group has devoted very significant time and effort to this project and given its best shot because it is dedicated to the Community and does not want to let it down.*

Members of the public were then invited to speak. A number of questions were asked and comments made including the following:

- *Everyone is grateful to the CLT for all the good work it has done for Queen Camel but we still have to ask whether its proposals for the Old School site are in the best interests of the village and whether it has the skills, knowledge and ability to carry out such ambitious plans.*
- *CLT Directors do have relevant experience including running a school with a £1m. pa. budget and running multi-million pound government projects.*
- *The CLT has not kept the village properly informed about its plans, it has not produced a viable business plan and it shows little understanding of the vast sums of money required to repair, maintain and develop the Site.*
- *Will the CLT's building and site survey become public knowledge? Probably, but not at present because of current negotiations. The possibly substantial cost of necessary remedial works is currently being discussed with professional surveyors.*
- *The CLT business plan allocates £1,500 for fabric repairs but visible cracks in the Old School House suggest that the building has been undermined, and if that is the case the necessary repairs would cost tens of thousands of pounds.*
- *On one of the recent occasions when the Old School was flooded the repairs apparently cost £1.2m. There is nothing in the CLT Business Plan and Financial Report about contingency funding to put things right if this were to happen again, and if it did the tenants would leave, the CLT would lose its revenue and the Site would become a major liability which the village would probably have to pick up.*
- *The CLT recognises the risk but the Site itself would remain a community asset which could be sold to meet any liability.*
- *But in that event, who would want to buy such a vulnerable site?*
- *In the past, flood waters in the School buildings have only risen inches rather than feet above floor level and the school never took any flood prevention measures. The CLT on the other hand has set aside £10k.-£12k. for flood prevention measures including flood barriers on all*

doors, covers on all air-bricks and non-return valves on sewers. In the past much damage was caused by vehicle wash but we now have a road closure scheme and we would also consider sealing the two gateways (with the old iron gates).

- Would the CLT be able to insure the Site against flooding and if not, what would happen if the Site flooded before the CLT could accumulate enough money to take pay for prevention measures? *The CLT would not be able to obtain insurance against flooding but flood prevention measures would be its top priority when and if it acquired the Site.*
- There is no allocation for capital investment in the CLT business plan.
- Many retail units in nearby towns are standing empty though their rents are lower than what the CLT would have to charge to meet its costs. *The CLT would permit tenants to share units, as in the Red Brick Building near Glastonbury, and this would make rents more affordable.*

A discussion ensued between CLT representatives and other residents about the extent to which the Red Brick Building at Glastonbury could be regarded as a successful and suitable exemplar.

- Many such community ventures are in more densely populated areas with a bigger 'doughnut' (impact area) than Queen Camel so the viability of the CLT scheme is questionable.
- Within Queen Camel's 'doughnut' there are existing premises (similar in size to those proposed for the Site) which are standing empty; finding tenants could be difficult.
- The owner of a small business within the Queen Camel 'doughnut' confirmed how difficult it has become for such businesses to generate sufficient revenue to pay rent and warned that the CLT would seriously struggle to find paying tenants.
- Is there really a demand for units the size of a home office or converted garage? *The original feasibility study indicated that there was such a demand and one of the reasons for the current CLT survey is to check on current needs, as part of the CLT's due diligence.*
- The CLT survey seems one sided, biased towards the CLT's vision for the Site rather than asking residents for their own views.
- The CLT's idea of a changing room for the disabled is excellent.
- Working on Listed buildings often costs many times the original estimate, especially if asbestos is found, and we need a guarantee from the CLT that any unanticipated costs will not fall on the Parish. *The CLT is an independent body which will only purchase the Site if it receives sufficient funding. If the business were subsequently to fail the CLT's creditors would take charge of its asset, the Site, so it would not become a liability on the village.*
- What does the CLT mean by 'The Community'? *It means Queen Camel, plus neighbouring parishes, plus the parishes which surround them - the so-called 'doughnut'.*
- If the CLT bid is withdrawn the local community will have no control over the Site. If SCC fails to sell and withdraws its security the Site could be occupied by a hippy commune, travellers or noisy pop groups, and this would be a concern to residents.
- Conversely, no sensible owner of a Listed building would fail to secure it against intrusion.
- Queen Camel is very fortunate to have brilliant services like the Medical Centre, school, shop, post office, pub, church, hall and playing field as well as many clubs, associations and activities which promote wellbeing, health and social cohesion, and we all want to protect its special character. The CLT's plans for artisan workshops and an Enterprise, Education and Special Needs Centre are unnecessary, divisive and likely to have an adverse impact on the village and this kind of social engineering project would be more suitably located in one of our local towns. Queen Camel's Old School site could be put to far better use serving the

real needs of the village - additional housing and car parking.

- We should ask the Parish Council to withdraw its support for the CLT proposals and ask the CLT itself to think again about a project which is opposed by so many in the village.
- The CLT deserves respect and congratulations for what it had done at Roman Way to help young people and others stay in the village close to family and friends but there remains a need for housing in the village, including social housing, starter homes and housing for residents who want to downsize. Clearly opinion in the village is divided, but the CLT seems to suffer from tunnel vision and the views of residents who do not share that vision are simply ignored. The CLT could demonstrate the reality of its commitment to the village by listening to its residents. *Previous surveys show popular support for the CLT's plans.*
- What Queen Camel really needs is more housing, not artisan units.
- The CLT might have won more backing for its ideas if had been more open handed with information. When residents feel that information is being kept confidential and withheld from them they tend to become suspicious.
- The CLT should consider the damaging impact of its plans on existing businesses & facilities.
- Development of such a visually sensitive site should be managed by qualified professionals under the oversight of a democratically elected and transparent village committee.
- What the village is really short of is light commercial property, possibly with integrated living accommodation, and genuinely affordable housing to buy and to rent.
- *The SSDC Planning Department will not even countenance a caretaker's flat on the Site, let alone further residential development, and the Environment Agency states that it would veto any new structures within 20m. of the riverbank - almost half of the Site. The CLT would like to develop an attractive garden which would bring residents on to the Site.*
- Whatever the preferences of Planners, if new housing were the only viable option for a site with existing but redundant buildings SSDC would find it difficult to refuse consent.
- *The CLT has concentrated on a Wellbeing Centre and artisan and similar units because that was what it was asked to do. SCC has offered a discount because it recognises that services offered by the CLT scheme could save SCC money in the long term. These services were also the basis on which the CLT was awarded a number of different grants.*
- The County and District Councils might see things differently if the Site were sold to a commercial developer for housing, providing more homes for our young people and giving tax payers a better return.
- *Commercial developers are in business to make money, not to satisfy the wishes of the local community whatever they promise and residents are unlikely to find any developer more 'sympathetic' than the CLT.*
- However developers cannot easily renege on their obligations under Section 106 agreements [between developers and the Planning Authority].
- Both SCC and SSDC are known to be in financial difficulties. If there is any truth in the rumour that SCC has been offered £350k. for the Site the Council is surely obliged to consider the offer, given its duty to taxpayers. Our MP will be asked to look into this.

At this stage a resident proposed that the Meeting vote on whether or not it supported the CLT's plans.

- Another resident questioned whether the Meeting was truly representative of the whole village.
- Another suggested that the CLT would do well to listen to the many residents who had given up their evening and taken the time and trouble to come the Meeting in order to express their views. The Meeting had been well publicised and those residents who had not attended were in effect abstaining.
- Another asked, if residents vote against the CLT's proposals, what would they be voting for?
- *A CLT representative explained that the position seemed to be that if the CLT's bid does not go forward SCC will sell the Old School site by auction in March 2019*

Electors attending the Meeting were then asked to vote on this question:

Are you in favour of the Queen Camel Community Land Trust proposals for the Old School site or against them?

Votes in favour of the CLT's proposals	14
Votes against the CLT's proposals	61
Abstentions	8

- In the light of the results of the vote and the support voiced for more affordable housing, a resident asked whether the CLT would be prepared to pursue a parallel course including affordable housing for sale and for rent.
- A CLT representative explained that *a parallel course would not be possible because the grant money that the CLT is hoping to win is for the project to do with wellbeing and artisans. Without those grants the CLT would have to pull out and SCC would put the Old School site up for auction.*

There was a consensus that there was no further business to be transacted so the Chairman thanked the attendees and closed the Meeting at 9.11pm.

P.Pender-Cudlip

9th December, 2018