



Queen Camel Parish

Minutes of the Parish Meeting held at 7pm on Thursday 23rd February 2017 at the Memorial Hall

The meeting, held at the behest of the Parish Council and chaired by its Chairman John Brendon (JB), was attended by 84 members of the public including representatives of the Queen Camel Community Land Trust (CLT). Its main purpose was to tell residents what was being done about the former site of Countess Gytha Primary School, generally known as the Old School site (OSS), and to give them an opportunity to ask questions and air their views.

JB opened the meeting by reviewing the background. Community interest in the OSS was expressed in the *Community Plan* (2005), *Development Plan* (2009) and draft *Neighbourhood Plan* (2014) but it was the decision of Somerset County Council (SCC) to put the site up for sale in June 2016 shortly after the school moved out that galvanized residents, and after the public voiced strong support for community ownership at an Extraordinary Parish Council meeting SCC agreed to postpone the sale. A parish questionnaire suggested substantial support for the idea of using the OSS for the benefit of the community and the Parish Council arranged for it to be listed as an *Asset of Community Value*. The Queen Camel Community Land Trust (CLT) was currently investigating possible uses for the site and having commissioned a *Feasibility Study* and submitting (to SCC) a formal Expression of Interest in a *Community Asset Transfer* (CAT) it was now working on a full business plan.

Describing what he called “a once in a lifetime chance for the community to get this iconic site” JB listed the main opportunities and risks as follows:

- Opportunities: social and health services, youth provision, workshops, car parking, open space and the preservation of a Conservation Area.
- Risks: operating costs, flooding, divisions of opinion in the parish, acquisition costs if a CAT was not granted, potential dereliction and boarding up.

Two members of the public put forward reasons for caution:

- The minority who answered the parish questionnaire might not represent the whole parish.
- Flooding was the main reason why the school was moved to a new site. If SCC has so little confidence in flood mitigation measures why should the village take a different view?
- SCC Highways recently opposed a planning application involving increased vehicular access onto the A359 near the bridge so new artisan units at the OSS are unlikely to be approved.
- Renting out commercial buildings is not easy and it is commercially and financially risky so if the OSS were acquired by the community it could become more of a burden than a benefit.

CLT Chairman Rosemary Heath-Coleman (RHC) explained the CLT position:

- Once the CLT has completed its business plan and has been told learnt (soon after April 13th) whether SCC favours a CAT it should be able to share detailed plans with CLT members and the wider community, probably through an Open event which might possibly be held at the OSS.
- CLT plans for the OSS support SCC policies on adult and children's social care, education and training and special needs, and this helps make the OSS eligible for a CAT.
- The CLT envisages using the Victorian Schoolhouse for a Health & Wellbeing hub, the 1920s building for an Education & Learning hub with artisan workshops, businesses and training facilities, the hall for use by Scouts and others and the open space for gardens and a car park. It is talking to architects and arranging various types of building (and other) surveys.
- Among those who have registered an interest in renting premises are a picture framer, an upholsterer, a sculptor, a musical instrument maker and the Benefice office - and as any project comes closer to realization the number of interested parties tends to grow.
- Among the agencies and charities to which the CLT is looking for ideas, partnerships or funding - or all three - are The Hub (Yeovil), The Red Brick Building (Glastonbury), The Mendip Hub (Wells), The Literary and Scientific Institute (Bridport), St Simon and St Jude Church hub (Milton on Stour), South Somerset Mind, the Heart of Wessex Local Action Group, Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership, Access for All, Power to Change, the Somerset Community Foundation and the National Lottery.
- CLT plans for the OSS include community support and activities for old and young in Queen Camel and the neighbouring villages, maintaining the tradition established when a local benefactor endowed the school with land and building 140 years ago.

A number of comments and questions put forward by members of the public were addressed:

- In response to a suggestion that plans for the OSS should focus on the interests of Queen Camel exclusively a CLT representative Chris Bennett (CB) pointed out that our sports clubs, school, medical centre and shop serve and are supported by the neighbouring villages and that Queen Camel thrives precisely because it acts as a local hub.
- A member of the public with experience of renting out commercial property added that in this kind of business flexibility is more important than certainty and that more takers for space emerge once space is actually available.
- In response to the question, "Where is the money going to come from?" JB said much would depend on the outcome of the CAT application which would drive the CLT business planning and grant funding.
- In response to RHC's plea to consider the needs of the less fortunate a member of the public observed that emotion and charity were no substitute for a proper business plan.
- Another member of the public drew attention to the difficulties of obtaining flood insurance.
- CB explained that the CLT was still gathering information and working on such matters. It had urged the Council not to hold a public meeting at this time because it knew that being unable to answer some the questions which would be raised might cause frustration.
- Endorsing this view a member of the public noted that once the CLT business plan was complete it would be clear whether the Parish Council was required to underwrite it. If there were no such requirement, then fears about the possible impact on parish funds would disappear - so it might have been better to hold this meeting in a couple of months' time.
- In response JB observed that it was appropriate to give parishioners an opportunity to find out what had been happening since the last proper public discussion about the OSS which was held some 8 months ago.

- It was generally accepted that plans for the OSS would require broad community support even if it is not easy to define or measure what exactly constitutes 'community support'.
- A member of the public urged those present to accentuate the positive and consider possible community benefits rather than just focusing on the commercial risks and costs.
- Another member of the public pointed out that if the community acquired the OSS it could ensure sympathetic development even if all or part of the site was subsequently sold on.
- Answering a question CB agreed that community support was essential and said that the CLT would not act unilaterally but come back to the community before deciding to go ahead.
- Another member of the public suggested that if an assurance was given that a fully costed five-year business plan would be put to the parish for approval before any scheme went ahead, then worries about a call on parish funds would be alleviated. JB pointed out that if it was a CLT scheme then the question of it becoming a charge on parish funds should not arise.
- Other members of the public questioned why the CLT *Feasibility Study* had to be kept confidential and whether there was a 'Plan B' if a CAT was not forthcoming.
- In response to expressions of doubt about the reliability and usefulness of figures gathered by the parish questionnaire the compiler agreed that the 'wish list' of findings was indicative rather than definitive. He also pointed out that the majority (of respondents) in favour of keeping the 'iconic' Victorian Schoolhouse for the community was smaller than the majority in favour of keeping the rest of the Old School site.
- After RHC expressed disappointment at the failure of attendees to put forward positive ideas a member of the public suggested that the OSS could be used for the elderly during the daytime and the young in the evenings and for meetings and other activities for which the Memorial Hall is not suitable.
- Responding to another suggestion JB felt it would be premature to hold a straw poll on CLT plans pending the CAT decision and the completion of the business plan.

JB expressed gratitude to the CLT for everything it was doing and thanked members of the public for the many thoughtful contributions which would help inform the CLT in its continuing work.

Under any other business there was a short discussion about the two suggested routes for an upgraded A303 between Sparkford and Podimore:

- A member of the public warned about the environmental impact on Queen Camel, Wales, West Camel, Bridgehampton, RNAS Yeovilton and Podimore during the 3-4 years of construction if Option 1 (which largely follows the existing route) was chosen. It carries a large number of vehicles every day and some would be likely to look for back routes between Sparkford and Podimore.
- Another member of the public agreed that those 3-4 years would be horrible but pointed out that if the northern route were chosen that countryside would be destroyed forever.

JB thanked everyone for attending and wished them goodnight.

The meeting finished at 8.19pm.

P.Pender-Cudlip

1st March, 2017