

Traveller Site Consultation – Rowsley Public Meeting

Councillor Bob Butcher, Deputy Leader of the Council, opened the meeting with introductions and an explanation of how the meeting would be conducted. Councillor Marilyn Franks, Chair of the Gypsy and Traveller Working Group, then presented some background to the process being followed by the Council.

Following Councillor Butcher's statement regarding only using part of the car park as a temporary traveller site, Councillor Victoria Friend, Chair of Rowsley Parish Council, raised the size of the car park as an issue due to it not meeting the size criteria set out in the document used by the Gypsy and Traveller Working Group to assess the sites.

Councillor Victoria Friend then presented the following representations on behalf of the Parish Council:

In 2012 Paul Wilson who is now the Chief Executive came to a public meeting in Rowsley and told us that they were putting a traveller family on the car park for a few months until a permanent site in Ashbourne could be established. 12 years later we are no closer to a permanent site and the travellers are still being shunted from unsuitable car park to unsuitable car park. This is gross negligence of a legal duty by the district council and because of this negligence you are considering putting travellers back in our car park.

The Parish Council refuse to accept that Rowsley is a suitable traveller site for the following reasons:

- 1. The seven businesses and award-winning Level centre for disabled people employ a total of 48 employees and depend on the car park for their survival - it is extremely busy 7 days a week with 30-50 cars parked there at any time. I have sent dozens of photos and reports of car numbers to the district council since this consultation started to prove it. If you take away the car park – and you would have to use all of it according to your own size requirements - where are all these cars going to park? Have any of you been stuck in the regular gridlock on Chatsworth Road due to the number of parked cars and heavy traffic?*
- 2. The users of the cycle trail and Derwent Valley Heritage Way depend on the car park for safe and secure access to the trail, which was built to lead directly into the car park for this reason. The County Council are making their own objections to this proposal because they want to extend the cycle trail through the car park and over the A6 – as you are well aware.*
- 3. The site is completely unsuitable for travellers. It has an extremely steep unprotected drop to the river with a virtually non-existent fence and is unsafe. It gets very little light and is damp and unwelcoming. The traveller family have been put there twice in the past and both times they left of their own accord because they hate it.*
- 4. The site is just a few metres from the path to the local primary school, which is 150m from the site. We know there are particular risks regarding this family from a safeguarding point of view. The headmistress of the school told me that some parents have said they would withdraw their children from the school if the*

travellers came back to Rowsley, so the council would be putting the school itself in jeopardy as well as the children!

- 5. The site is too small! According to the District Council the car park is 0.01ha over the minimum size for a traveller site. However, this is a basically a piece of waste ground left alone by the council for over 50 years and a large part of it has gone back to nature. Electronic mapping systems are nowhere near reality, and I have given you photos to prove it. The site is at least a third smaller than you think it is.*
- 6. The council have said that their plan is to select two or more sites and move the traveller family around to ease the burden on the local communities, but two of the family members are in extreme old age. They are not capable of being shunted from pillar to post, which the council well knows. None of the proposed sites are suitable and they were all removed from consideration in 2022 because the council knows this. You are being unfair to the travellers AND unfair to the local community.*

We are also fed up with the council's obfuscation. You deny installing a new tap on site, but this is obviously brand-new equipment. We are not fools and I for one am fed up with being treated as such.

Councillor Friend then presented the following representations on behalf of Stuart Allen, Chair of the Board of LEVEL Centre:

I would like to thank Victoria Friend at Rowsley Parish Council who has agreed to read this out on my behalf. My name is Stuart Allen, and I am the Chair of the Board of LEVEL Centre based on Old Station Close. On behalf of the board and LEVEL Centre staff, participants, users, parents, and carers I am writing to share our concerns for this proposal and the consultation process.

We are so sorry to not be at the meeting in person this evening. The team at LEVEL Centre wants to express to the working group and Rowsley community that not being present has no reflection on their commitment for Old Station Close car park to remain a car park. It is vital for its charitable work. Unfortunately, with this meeting taking place on a Friday evening we have no representation from our centre or community tonight. We have been requesting the meeting date since July and unfortunately where it has fallen has made it difficult to cancel prior commitments.

LEVEL specialises in programmes with Learning Disabled people, disabled creatives, young people who are autistic and/or neurodivergent, SEN schools and the wider community. Most of our parents and carers have struggled to find carers this evening to attend in person. We want to assure our neighbours and community that not being present bears no reflection on our commitment to this consultation.

LEVEL Centre brings in significant investment into Derbyshire Dales from a range of national stakeholders who support good causes including the National Lottery Reaching Communities Fund for community workshops and volunteer programmes. We are only going to see our footfall increase over the coming years as our offer continues to grow. We are a beacon of success in championing disabled artists and contribute to the arts ecology and are invested in by Arts Council England.

We are concerned that the Gypsy and Traveller Working Group and the representatives who produced The Ark Consultancy Report have not consulted with LEVEL Centre as a

neighbour to the carpark. The car park is vital to our charity and users. When LEVEL was granted planning permission, the Highways and Parking team outlined that Old Station Close car park could be used as additional parking for the centre. Permission to build LEVEL would not have been granted based on LEVEL having just 3 car parking spaces, two of which are disabled bays.

This car park provides essential car parking for visitors, tourists, parents, carers, staff and more. It is also LEVEL's fire evacuation point. There is nowhere else suitable for a safe meeting point this side of the A6 to choose as an alternative safe meeting point.

The loss of a public car park near an arts charity that serves disabled individuals will have significant adverse impacts on LEVEL and its users. Beneficiaries rely on convenient parking due to mobility issues, making nearby parking essential for participation. Without this, accessing LEVEL's services may become challenging or impossible. This could strain resources and affect people's wellbeing, resulting in more impact on other council services.

Over the past few weeks our Executive Director has requested documents including copies of all minutes and paperwork related to all discussions that took place in deciding how the 31 sites were shortlisted to 6 proposed sites. The working group has previously pointed them in the direction of the inaccurate ARK matrix, this is not what has been requested. Please can you share the minutes and paperwork related to this decision-making ASAP so that LEVEL can fully respond to the online consultation. Thank you.

In addition, we are deeply concerned that an Equality Impact Assessment is planned following the consultation period and that it has not taken place prior to the 6 proposed sites being selected.

Looking at the traveller site size requirements proposed, it appears that the usable area of the Rowsley site is too small to accommodate the site. Can you clarify how the council has measured the area of the car park and share any plans or maps that show the size of the site to inform LEVEL's consultation response.

Lastly, no explanation has been provided as to where people who currently use the car park could park safely on this side of the A6 if the resource was taken away. The road on Old Station Close is already at capacity on a daily basis. There is no other public parking available in Rowsley.

We hope that the council and working group understand the significant impact the loss of Old Station Close car park would have on disabled residents across Derbyshire and beyond.

Dr Siobhan Spencer, Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group, presented the following representations:

It has been 16 years, we need to move forward, we all agree that car parks are not the best place for these families. Several planning applications have been submitted during that time, sadly none have provided a solution. The process has been immensely frustrating.

In 2008, a substantial list was produced which included Rowsley, sadly over the years many of these potential pieces of land have gone.

The Woodyard site needs to be further investigated by the District Council as a potential permanent site.

The group currently sited on Matlock Station car park are happy to stay there until a permanent site has been established.

The group currently sited on Matlock Bath Station car park need to be moved to an alternative site and this cannot wait until a permanent site is available. They would like to be in the south of the district, near Ashbourne, to be near family who can provide support.

If Rowsley is used, the site will need to be cleared substantially and privacy fences would need to be put in place. Planning permission would need to be sought to allow for the site to be properly regulated. This would allow for a site licence to be applied for under the 1960 caravan sites act. The same process should be followed for the site on Matlock Station car park.

Councillor Susan Hobson, District and County Ward Councillor for the area of Rowsley presented the following representations:

I am fully aware of the responsibilities of the District Council to its homeless and vulnerable families. I do not believe that any of the sites being consulted on are suitable, and I hope that the District Council will listen to the people of Rowsley. The matrix of sites produced by the Council is inaccurate, especially with regards to the Rowsley site.

Derbyshire County Council will be opposing the site due to plans for an extension to the White Peak Loop. Meetings of the Gypsy and Traveller Working Group have repeatedly voted against bringing these sites forward in the past. I therefore question the legality of the consultation process itself. Hundreds of representations have been received regarding the potential site at Rowsley.

I implore the Council to listen to the people of Rowsley, this site has not worked in the past and will not work in the future. Please listen to Dr Spencer and the people here tonight and make the right decision for Rowsley and the Travellers.

Councillor Neil Buttle, Deputy Leader of Derbyshire Dales District Council, made the following statement:

Many good points have been made so far, the local residents of Rowsley are reasonable people with genuine concerns regarding the use of this potential site. I would like to ask you to lobby your County Councillor to allow the District Council to lease the land on Mayfield Road, Ashbourne for use as a Traveller Site. The site is within the Derbyshire Dales Local Plan and so it would be likely to be granted planning permission for this purpose. We have a statutory and moral duty to establish a site.

The Chair of the meeting then opened the floor to representations from residents and others present.

Councillor Stuart Lees, DDDC: I agree with what has been said tonight, car parks are not suitable. We shouldn't be discussing car parks, we should be paying consultants to find a piece of land for the Travellers.

Mr John Youatt: We should abandon the search for temporary sites on car parks and concentrate all efforts on making the Woodyard site work. It has planning permission and is in the south of the district so would meet the needs of the Travellers.

Dr Spencer: There must be facilities for the Travellers, regardless of which sites are taken forward.

Head Teacher, Rowsley Primary School: There are serious safeguarding concerns as the car park is a five-minute walk from the school. The last time the Travellers were sited in Rowsley they could be heard from the playground, with unacceptable language and screaming. Children are encouraged to cycle to school using a cycle lane adjacent to the site, when the Travellers were here previously children saw human faeces on that cycle lane and it was made unsafe for their use. I understand that the Council has legal obligations to the Travellers, but you also have safeguarding obligations to our pupils.

Local Resident: What is the budget for this consultation?

Local Resident: The County Council shouldn't object to the site in Rowsley and not allow the District Council to lease the site in Ashbourne. The District Council shouldn't be moving these vulnerable families to then move them again.

Local Resident: The Travellers shouldn't be moved from a busy car park in Matlock Bath to another busy car park in Rowsley that is heavily used by businesses.

Local Resident: As the owner of a business near the site, we would lose customers and staff if you move the Travellers to Rowsley.

Local Resident: The proposals being consulted on are poorly presented, there is a difference of opinion on the size of the site and the amount of parking which will be lost. No detail has been provided regarding the amount of parking which would remain.

Local Resident: The elected officials should be lobbying the County Council to release the land at Ashbourne for lease.

Local Resident: There are severe drops on two sides of the triangular site, will the site be properly fenced and secured?

The trail currently goes through the car park, where will this be diverted to and where will users of the trail be directed to park?

When will an Equality Impact Assessment be completed?

What is the timescale for the use as a temporary site?

Dr Siobhan Spencer: I would like to be appointed as a member of the Gypsy and Traveller Working Group.

Councillor Victoria Friend, Rowsley Parish Council: Councillors need to understand the context of the situation, so they don't go over old ground. It is disappointing that Officers are not present to provide answers to questions from residents.

Local Resident: The site has regularly flooded and this needs to be taken into account.

Local Resident: The residents of Rowsley have a lack of trust in the District Council. Where will the funds come from to provide a site and how will Council services be affected?

Do you have a timescale for providing a temporary site?

Local Resident: Local businesses and the environment would be detrimentally affected by moving Travellers to the site in Rowsley. The District Council should be working with the Peak District National Park Authority and landowners in the area to solve this problem.

Ian Baker, Clerk to Nether Haddon Parish Meeting: The proposed site is too small for this use. The usable area is no more than 1300sqm, trees would need to be removed to make effective use of the site. It would not be possible to maintain any parking space on the site,

this would cause more parking on Church Lane which would be dangerous. Ecological assessments would need to be done before removing trees and moving Travellers on to the site.

Local Resident: Could authority be delegated to senior Officers of the Council to buy land as and when it becomes available?

Does the £30,000 earmarked for the development of temporary sites (as referenced in the consultation materials) impact the budget for the search for a permanent site?

Local Resident: The usable area of the site is 0.12 hectares, that should be enough to disqualify the site.

Local Resident: This consultation is a waste of taxpayers' money, residents feel very strongly that this site and others are unsuitable. The Council needs to carry out its statutory legal and moral duties to the Travellers and residents.

Local Resident: The District and County Council need to work together to resolve this problem, there is a duty to cooperate. How will a dialogue between the two authorities be facilitated?

Local Resident: If the car park is used as a temporary Traveller site, how would this be monitored, and action would be taken if the code of conduct is breached?

Local Resident: Have the fixed penalty notices issued been enforced and paid? Will the Travellers be expected to pay rent on a temporary site, if so, what would be the consequences if this were not paid? Could compulsory purchase powers be used to find land for this purpose?

Local Resident: If parking is retained at the front of the car park, how would emergency vehicles get to the back of the site in an emergency?

Local Resident: I rent my house from Platform Housing, the Council's social housing provider, if I acted in the same way as the Travellers I would be evicted. Why are they treated differently to other residents?

Local Resident: Viability works should be done if this site is to be used, these include a Phase 1 habitat survey and biodiversity net gain.

Local Resident: I am worried that the Council does not appreciate the history of the situation.

Local Resident: If the decision is made to use this car park as a temporary Traveller site, the consequences of losing this area of car parking need to be established and published in full.

Cllr Joanne Linthwaite: I have visited the car park and all of the businesses in the area, and I really appreciated the time taken to explain the background to me. I have asked how previous issues have been addressed and I have been informed that in the past fines have been issued and paid. I believe the focus should be on finding a permanent site, I have put forward three possible sites to be assessed for this purpose. Councillor Marilyn Franks has extensive experience of looking for and finding Traveller sites in the past, and I have confidence that she will be able to solve this problem for the Travellers and the wider community.

Cllr Victoria Friend: When Travellers last occupied this site, the entrance to the cycle track was blocked, the bank side was covered in refuse, and there was excessive dog barking and shouting. None of this is acceptable, however if you have a code of conduct in place outlining the behaviour that isn't acceptable where will you move the Travellers to when they break that code, and when does your duty of homelessness stop?

Councillor Bob Butcher gave some closing remarks, thanking those in attendance for their contributions and closing the meeting.