

8th October 2003

Dear Cottenham Resident

Travellers Site, Smithy Fen

At the Annual Parish Meeting on 24th April, you were one of many residents who asked to be informed of progress on this issue. Without wishing in any way to “pass the buck”, the Parish Council must first make it clear that it has no powers to bring to bear on this matter, nor does it have the financial resources to embark on legal action. Those powers and resources are vested in other authorities, principally the Police in matters of crime and anti-social behaviour, and South Cambs District Council in terms of planning infringements, litter etc. All we can do on your behalf is to press for those powers to be exercised.

The Parish Council therefore met with officers of the District Council and Police on 7th May to demand action. Those officers undertook to do all in their power to address the problems. In the several months that have passed, a number of actions have been taken, and we asked for another meeting so that we could be brought fully up to date with developments. This took place on 23rd September, and this is what we were told:

Cambridgeshire Police

- There has been **no increase in reported crime** in Cottenham
- In response to the many complaints about driving standards, a large number of “stops” have been made. In only one case has a traveller been found to be driving without the requisite documents. Similarly there has only been one case detected of under-age driving. Several arrests have been made for speeding and other traffic offences.
- In spite of residents’ fears, no cases of actual violence towards members of the public have been reported.
- Police resources are limited, and 24-hour cover is impossible, but the Police have great sympathy for the legitimate residents of the Fen and intend to support them as far as possible, including regular use of the helicopter.
- Anti-Social Behaviour Orders are virtually useless in this situation, as they apply to repeat offending by a single individual, which has not been possible to demonstrate here.
- The Police want to receive as much intelligence as possible about activities on and around the site and of anti-social or criminal activity in the village. Many residents have complained that contacting the Police is difficult, and that reported incidents often seem to be dismissed as not warranting Police action. The Council has asked the Police the best route for reporting incidents. Insp. Howell (local Sector Commander) has recommended the following:
 - Telephone number to use: **01223 358966** (Parkside Police Station)
 - Ask for **Force Control Room**. They may take some time to answer, but please be patient! They should be able to judge if immediate action is necessary, and if not will log the call.
 - If it’s a serious incident, use **999**

Please give this a try. If difficulties are experienced, please let us know and we will take it up again with the Police. Keep a note of when and to whom the incident was reported, otherwise

it can't be followed up later. Incidents **must** be reported, otherwise officially **they never happened**.

South Cambs District Council

- The areas occupied illegally (i.e. without planning permission), and those on which unauthorised construction works have been carried out, are now subject to Stop and/or Enforcement Notices. These can be and have been appealed against by the travellers. The first of the appeals are likely to be determined by the government Inspector in October. If the Inspector finds in SCDC's favour, they can begin to take "other steps" to end what will then be illegal use of the land. If, however, the Inspector finds in favour of the travellers, SCDC will have to re-think it's whole strategy. In the past, the Inspector has upheld SCDC's position. Contractors who have been identified as working on or delivering materials to the areas covered by the Notices have been warned that they risk prosecution.
- Although there was a significant decrease in the number of caravans after last Easter's large influx, newcomers continue to arrive. Although many re are occupying land covered by Stop and Enforcement, little can be done to remove them until the results of the appeals are known.
- Even if the Inspector finds in SCDC's favour, the legal process to clear the illegally occupied sites could take many months. **There is no "quick fix"**. It should also be remembered that there are over 30 completely legal pitches in Smithy Fen, some of which have been purchased by the new arrivals.
- The Planning department has appointed an additional part-time (50%) Enforcement Officer.
- SCDC has engaged specialist lawyers with very considerable experience in this field.
- SCDC are very aware of the problems that have been created in other areas – education, public health, litter. Some of these are the responsibility of other Authorities, particularly the County Council. Although the Travellers Working Group has been re-convened, some of these authorities are not represented, and there is no overall co-ordination. It was promised that this would be progressed.

The Parish Council has also met with our MP, James Paice. He is very supportive of the Parish Council's position, believes that the present law is inadequate, and has introduced a number of amendments to new legislation to toughen it up, all of which have been rejected by the Government.

The above does not represent the Parish Council's position, it is simply a report of what we have been told. We remain very frustrated by the lack of real progress and very sympathetic to the residents of Smithy Fen who continue to have their lives disrupted. Our District Councillors have conveyed our feelings to SCDC, and share our concern at the slow progress, but seem unable to force any more assertive action. If residents are unhappy with the situation, and wish to express those feelings to the Authorities in person, we will arrange a suitable meeting on your behalf. We will continue to apply what pressure we can, but need all the support we can get. If you have comments to make please write to those who do have the authority or influence to make a difference. Please copy any correspondence to the Parish Council.

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