

NOTES OF MEETING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF STONEHAVEN CARAVAN PARK
19.45 pm. 11TH AUGUST 2011
HELD AT STONEHAVEN BOWLING CLUB

Present: Cllr Graeme Clarke (Chairman),
David Fleming (Secretary, Stonehaven Town Partnership),
Graham Wall (Landscape Services Manager, Aberdeenshire Council),
Frank Budd (Director, STP and Chairman of Tourist Group),
Owners of static caravans,
Residents of Stonehaven and Cowie.

Cllr Graeme Clarke welcomed everyone to the meeting and gave a brief outline of the decision by Aberdeenshire Council in February 2011 to look for alternative management arrangements for all 10 caravan parks currently run by them. They approached the partnerships relevant to each park with the intention that the parks should be run for community benefit. In the case of Stonehaven the Stonehaven Town Partnership (STP) were approached. Cllr Clarke said that the purpose of this meeting was to listen to the views of users of the caravan park and residents.

David Fleming then outlined the deliberations between February and now. A sub-committee of STP had been set up. It was felt strongly that Stonehaven would not have the volunteer capacity, nor the ability to raise funds, to run the caravan park on their own. Therefore expressions of interest from professional operators were sought. In July, the sub committee recommended to the Board that the Caravan Club should be the preferred bidder and the Board of STP accepted that recommendation.

David Fleming said that the existing management arrangements were unsustainable and the park needed major investment. He hoped the meeting would look to the future and make suggestions which could be used in the forthcoming negotiations with the Caravan Club. He said that STP had set up the meeting to listen to the views of the static caravan owners and residents prior to entering into negotiations between to the Caravan Club and the Stonehaven Town Partnership. A letter had been sent out previously to all static owners outlining the Caravan Club proposals.

Graeme Clarke then read out a communication from Elma McMenemy (a Tourism Consultant) (copy attached).

Dennis Deans expressed his thanks for the meeting saying he had been nominated to speak on behalf of other static owners. He queried why it had taken so long to get answers to their questions and said there had been a lack of communication from the STP. David Fleming explained that it had taken some time to get in touch with various operators to get their input. It had always been the intention to hold a meeting when there was something to discuss.

There was some discussion about where the investment was to come from to upgrade the caravan park if the Caravan Club took over the running. Graeme Clarke explained that the money was not European money but came from subscriptions paid by members of the Caravan Club. The Caravan Club is a non-profit organisation and the money made from subscriptions was spent on the acquisition and upgrading of caravan parks.

A member of the Cowie residents asked if they could be kept in the loop as regards developments.

A static owner pointed out that three/four years ago money had been available for the Stonehaven caravans to be plumbed in. What had happened to this money? Graham Wall explained that Aberdeenshire Council owned 10 caravan parks to fund from one budget. There had not been the funding available to invest in large scale upgrades. Graham Wall said that in 2006 four of the highest performing caravan parks were earmarked for improvement. It was then hoped that increased income would cover this loan. Ballater, Alford and Banff had been completed and Stonehaven was next on the list. However, because of the major budget reductions the decision was taken to halt this plan.

Several of the static owners wanted to know how many statics would be allowed on the site by the Caravan Club and how would they be chosen. At the moment all the static owners wanted to remain on site. It was also pointed out that sites are still being advertised for lease. Graham Wall answered that vacant sites can be filled to the end of the season. Agreements with Aberdeenshire Council were only for one year and nobody can guarantee a site for life.

One of the static owners pointed out that Forfar caravan park had been taken over by the Caravan Club and this had ruined the site. The promised investment of £1 million had not materialised. In reply, Frank Budd reported that the Caravan Club had said that Forfar had a 74% occupancy in April. The investment there had only just started, and would take place over 2 years.

Frank Budd pointed out that the caravan park was important to Stonehaven. There had been other bids for the park but these had fallen by the wayside. The Caravan Club was the only one still in the picture. He said that the status quo could not continue, and that Stonehaven had lost money over the last five years. Some compromises would have to be made.

One of the owners asked what other bids had been received? David Fleming replied that five operators had shown an interest but only two actually made a bid. The Caravan Club's bid was by far the best. However he reiterated that nothing had been signed. Negotiations had not yet started and much work was still to be done. Conditions suggested by the other bidders were worse than those of the Caravan Club. Planning permission precluded a year round site.

It was asked if there could be a clause that statics could remain and what would be the position of 'third party' hiring. Graeme Clarke pointed out that some people felt that, because of problems in the past, third party hiring should be stopped. Another owner pointed out that it was beneficial to Stonehaven to hire out the statics, given the shortage of B&Bs and hotels in the town. Would the Caravan Club allow this? David Fleming said that, whilst the Caravan Club had indicated a willingness to discuss these matters, no discussions or offers had taken place at all yet.

There was some discussion about the fact the caravan park was on Common Good Fund land. David Fleming and Graham Wall understood that this was the case. This placed restrictions on what could be done with any income from the park. The exact legal situation had yet to be established.

There was some debate about the social responsibility which should be shown to static owners, some of whom had been coming to Stonehaven for many years. A representative of the Recreation Grounds Trustees said that the Bowling Club caravan park had 50 caravans which had been plumbed in for £28,000. This site was full and had a waiting list. The income was £60,000 per

year. David Fleming felt that the main investment required by the Queen Elizabeth Caravan Park was a new facilities block. That would cost much more than the cost of plumbing in pitches.

There was some discussion about whether tourers or statics would bring in more income to Stonehaven. A touring caravanner pointed out that there are some seasonable pitches on a number of Caravan Club sites.

One Cowie resident pointed out that the statics were often empty outside weekends, and some sites were vacant.

A Caravan Club member asked what the alternative was if the Council stopped running the site. He suggested that present owners should be offered the chance to run it. Would they come up with the money? There was a suggestion of dividing the site into half tourers and half statics but he doubted whether the Caravan Club would take over the site on this basis.

An owner asked what would happen if the council stopped running the park. Graham Wall said that the decision had been made by Aberdeenshire Council to approach the community and, if there was no interest, to put the site on the open market. There was no allowance in the 2012/13 budget for the costs of running the park. Frank Budd pointed out that, if no community interest could be agreed, then this might mean the land being sold for housing or a supermarket. David Fleming said that, at present, there was no "Plan B", should a community solution not be found.

There was some discussion about Inverbervie which was community run. Some people thought it was run well, others thought it was not. Graham Wall said there were 26 fully serviced stances with a waiting list. It was a good example of a community run facility. Surpluses made each year were ploughed back.

One of the static owners mentioned a Community Enterprise initiative. David Fleming agreed to follow up this possibility. (Note: STP is already a member of the Development Trust Association Scotland, from which advice on this subject is available).

A static owner asked about other parks where places might be available. Graham Wall said that this information could be obtained and made public.

A member of the public asked why Aberdeenshire Council was getting rid of this site if it made them money. It was suggested that even if this was so, the parks overall needed investment, and this capital money was not available within the Aberdeenshire Council reduced budgets.

The static owners needed a guarantee that the STP would do their best to help them. They also needed to know as soon as possible if they could get on to the site next year. David Fleming said there would be very few changes until Autumn 2012. He suggested publishing the seasonal dates for next year in the next few weeks. It was reiterated that there was no 'done deal' and negotiations were still to be entered into.

In concluding the meeting and thanking people for their attendance, the Chairman said that notes of the meeting would be distributed as soon as possible.

13th August 2011.