

Homeless Residents at the Croft.

BFPC has responded to expressions of concern from several residents and businesses in the Parish about incidents and behaviour alleged to have been originated by people currently housed in The Croft. Our residents have shared worries and fears about behaviours witnessed such as loud, aggressive and threatening language, and apparent drug or alcohol abuse. They have drawn our attention to newspaper reports of court appearances by people housed in The Croft, which have detailed assault, burglary and sex offences.

It should be noted that the Parish Council has only limited statutory powers, which do not include the ability to compel individuals or agencies to provide information or to enter premises. We can ask questions but must rely on the good will and cooperation of those questioned to provide answers that will reassure our residents.

So, what have we done so far?

Initially we contacted Cornwall Council's Planning Department to ask if there had been a breach of planning control given that The Croft did not appear to be functioning any longer as a pub, restaurant or motel for travellers or holiday makers. We received a detailed response from the Department that, after thorough search of the original planning permission, there did not appear to be any restrictions on the number of nights that a chalet could be occupied by an individual. There was therefore no apparent breach of planning control. The Planning Officer helpfully provided us with a contact in the Rehousing Team who might be able to assist in our enquiries as to the backgrounds of the people being housed in The Croft and the nature of support being given to them.

An enquiry was therefore made to the Rehousing Team via email raising four specific questions about

1. ***For how long you intend to use the Croft premises for this purpose?***
2. ***What the backgrounds of the Croft residents are? (There have been rumours that they may include ex-offenders.)***

3. ***Is there a limit to the time that each resident is housed in the Croft?***
4. ***Any other information that our residents might find useful.***

When no reply was received after some days, a phone call was made to the Rehousing Team. The Team Manager was not available to respond. The following day we were surprised to receive an email stating that the enquiry had been classified a Freedom of Information request which might take 20 working days to be replied to.

However, we did in fact receive a reply yesterday with the following responses:

1. *“The accommodation is used as nightly paid accommodation. We will continue to use it until the current landlord decides otherwise, there is no longer a need for the accommodation, or the tenants move out.”* **So no end date to the current use.**
2. *“The residents are homeless individuals, from the local area. All have a reason to believe to be homeless, or are main duty homeless client.”* **This did not answer the question as to whether or not The Croft residents had offender backgrounds.**
3. *“There is no fixed time limit for a resident's stay at The Croft. The duration depends on how quickly they can find alternative accommodation”.*
4. *“At this time, we do not have any additional information to provide.”*

We recognise that this Department has a duty of confidentiality to their service users, nevertheless this does leave unanswered a number of fundamental questions of concern to our residents.

Contact was also made with Inspector Ned Bowie of Devon and Cornwall Police to share our concerns about the safety and well being of our community. He recommended that any resident witnessing anti-social behaviour should report it to the police by using the on-line reporting form or by calling 101. Regarding specific worries expressed by the staff at Hatt Post Office, he would be asking the local beat team to visit to reassure and give

advice as to how to respond to threatening behaviour or theft. The Parish Council then visited the Post Office and shared Inspector Bowie's advice with the staff and management. A post was also put on Hatt Chat and Botus Banter Facebook page recommending those steps to residents.

Cornwall Councillor Martin Worth agreed to facilitate our communications with the Rehousing Team by using the Case Work Assist channel, which may explain the rather speedier response from the Rehousing Team to the FOI request.

So, after exploring the avenues of enquiry open to us as a Parish Council we have a degree of clarity about this issue, thanks for which are due to those who have been able to assist. However, there still remain many unanswered questions which concern us.

As a public body, we absolutely recognise the plight and need of those who find themselves without a roof over their heads. Such a condition is not a "lifestyle choice" as some would have us believe. It can be the result of many different unforeseen circumstances: unemployment, ill health, relationship breakdowns and the national shortage of affordable housing. This is not just another example of "nimbyism." We genuinely feel that this is not the right place to accommodate so many homeless people. Here are our reasons and concerns:

1. It is especially regrettable that there was no prior communication or consultation with the community in order to properly assess the suitability of our small, rural Parish to accommodate so many homeless people, especially when some of them appear to have issues with drugs and alcohol and may also be sex offenders.
2. It is uncertain whether the chalets at The Croft have cooking facilities. If not, then this makes them particularly unsuited for residential accommodation, however brief.
3. The isolated location of The Croft, and limited availability of public transport make it very difficult for residents to purchase their everyday food, clothing or leisure activities. Many have been banned from accessing the shop at Hatt because of threatening behaviour and theft. This means that they now have to make the journey to the shops at Carkeel or Saltash,

often by foot along the busy and dangerous A388. One wheelchair user has been seen making this journey on more than one occasion.

4. We are given to understand that there is no full-time support on the premises from Housing or Social Services. Given the complex needs of many of The Croft residents, this would seem indefensible.
5. Are the residents in receipt of comprehensive and regular support packages to help them to address their physical and mental health needs?
6. Finally, we seriously question the placement of single, vulnerable female homeless in The Croft, where they could be at serious risk of abuse.

BFPC now look to our County Council, its departments and the guardians of law and order to address these the worries of our community in a timely and effective manner so that we may once more enjoy our hitherto peaceful and largely undisturbed way of life.

Cllr Malcolm Fletcher.