

Friends of Easthill
c/o 24 Easthill,
Frome,
BA11 5JW

Mendip District Council
Cannards Grave Road
Shepton Mallet
Somerset
BA4 5BT

****th January 2021**
by email and posted

To: Cllr. Ros Wyke, Cllr. Richard Pinnock, councillors of the Cabinet and Full Council and Chief Executive Stuart Brown.

Re: Statement by Ros Wyke, Leader of Mendip District Council on Monday 14th December 2020 regarding a pause on land adjoining Easthill Cemetery, Frome

After forming the community group the Friends of Easthill and taking part in many of the recent Cabinet and Full Council meetings, we recognise the challenges posed by Mendip District Council's Corporate Priorities to:

1. Make Mendip a fairer place.
2. Deliver on climate and ecological commitments.
3. Protect and enhance our towns and communities.

Protecting the climate and vital biodiverse habitats such as Easthill field, whilst at the same time providing more social and affordable housing in Frome and across Mendip, is not an easy or quick task but one that must aim at achieving the very best outcome for everyone within these three corporate priorities.

Our community group consists of the local community at Easthill, other residents of Frome and concerned people who live further afield brought together by the Cabinet decision of 2nd November 2020. Since then, through considerable research, talking to individual experts, conservation bodies and those with respected local and historical knowledge, we have come to appreciate the special nature of Easthill field even more. We have also given thought to its suitability as a location for social housing for people in need.

The council has recognised, through public pressure and the Scrutiny Board call-in, that Cabinet had insufficient and poor quality information in order to make an informed decision about whether to transfer the field at Easthill to Aster at the meeting on 2nd November 2020.

We trust that the pause announced on 14th December 2020 is a genuine pause in order to gather additional information and commission reports and we welcome this.

We want, going forward, a more open and transparent discussion about the future of Easthill field.

We note that the Chief Executive Stuart Brown will be reporting to Full Council in February 2021 on the constitutional and legal matters arising out of the Full Council meeting of 3rd December 2020. This will clarify the roles and powers of the Full Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Board and Asset Management Group.

Like the research we have undertaken for the field at Easthill, we urge that Mendip District Council's investigations will be appropriate and timely, to enable the calculation of the true value of this land beyond simply monetary terms or ease and speed of delivery of development.

According to consultants we have contacted along with Somerset Wildlife Trust and other conservation bodies, detailed and time sensitive surveys will be required in order to fully understand Easthill's Wood-pasture and Parkland habitat and the biodiversity it supports. The land at Easthill is complex; it has never been cultivated or fertilised and so represents an optimal example of naturally sequestered carbon. It's unique interconnected habitats require thorough appropriate ecological surveys conducted at the appropriate time.

The springs that rise on the sloping land of Easthill are above the highest flood risk site in Frome, leading to waterlogging of the cemetery and road flooding. To alleviate this problem MDC is facilitating the funding for the Wallbridge Natural Flood Management project. Building on this land and the potential future implications of loss and removal of mature trees, extensions, decking and paving of gardens could undermine this Flood Management initiative despite any mitigation that may be within the design. Without a detailed hydrological evaluation, the impacts of development on the flood risk areas are unknown.

A full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) would reveal the part this land plays in all of the Climate and Biodiversity Emergency commitments and the costs associated with it's loss. While we recognise that this is not yet a legal requirement it is acknowledged best practice especially for sensitive sites of this nature.

We have concerns for the health and wellbeing of residents if social housing were to go ahead at Easthill and welcome Cllr. Ros Wyke's undertaking to look wider in the search for alternative potential housing sites and the openness to explore other means to move forward the social housing agenda. Working with Frome Community Land Trust is a positive move to provide appropriate housing on appropriate land which will ultimately benefit in perpetuity those in housing need.

As the Leader of the Council rightly admits this will not be a quick undertaking. It needs to be a careful process where expert evidence and the public's voice is heard.

To demonstrate democracy in action we would appreciate a written reply to this letter and opportunities for future dialogue with the Council as investigations progress.

Friends of Easthill request clarification on the following :

1. How long does the council foresee the investigation process for the land at Easthill will take?
2. What surveys and reports will be commissioned for Easthill? When will they happen and when will each report be available?
3. Which groups/bodies are the council engaging with in order to find alternative brownfield sites and are other areas in Mendip being considered?
4. Which groups/bodies are the council engaging with to explore other methods to move forward the social housing agenda?
5. Has an assessment been made as to where in Mendip there is most social housing need?
6. Is other government funding being researched to help with brownfield site development?

Yours Sincerely

Helen Deeming
Bharati Pardhy
Nicola Player
Mark Player
Simon Pugh Jones

Annie Pugh Jones
Simon Bishop
Sarah Bishop
Susie Vowles
Sian Penlington

Cllr J Nash
James Nash
Harriet Nash
Niah Earl

And for and on behalf of XXX additional members of Friends of Easthill