

CAMP VIRUS & FIRE FEAR

David Lynch 16.12.20

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A GYPSY caravan site in West Oxfordshire is so overcrowded that it could contribute to the spread of Covid-19 and is a fire hazard, officials have said.

The Paddocks, a traveller site south of Bampton, is in breach of planning regulations because there are too many caravans on most of its pitches.

Earlier this year, a woman died at the site after being left in a hot car for 16 hours following a party attended by 'up to 400 people'.

Each pitch is meant to have room for 'one gypsy family' according to West Oxfordshire District Council; that is equivalent to three caravans.

But most have 12 to 15 caravans on, according to a council staff member.

And while the site is mostly designated for travellers, there are also concerns there are now too many caravans being lived in by 'non Gypsy residents'.

Concerns about safety risks were revealed at a West Oxfordshire District Council meeting this week.

The committee heard an update on 'enforcement issues' at the traveller site when it met on Monday. Accord-

OVERCROWDING: Travellers site pitch limits regularly breached, warns council



The Paddocks traveller site, from above.

Picture: Google Maps

ing to a report by planning officer Kim Smith, the site's occupants had been given permission for a series of pitches, each of which could be used by one family with up to three caravans.

But it added: "In recent years, a significantly higher number of units have been placed on the land and that a number of them are occupied by non-gypsy residents."

At the meeting, Ms Smith said many plots had between 12 and 15 caravans on them. Her report added: "Given the close proximity of the caravans, there are a number of potential risks in

terms of spread of fire, spread of Covid, safety and welfare of children in potentially dangerous living conditions."

Ms Smith said two of the plots had been given retrospective planning permission, allowing six caravans instead of three to be legally placed on them.

But she added: "I can confirm, as I speak, that has not been implemented yet."

Ms Smith said making sure the site was compliant with the law was a 'big project' for council staff, who were already dealing with a 'resource issue'.

The report added that many of the other issues at the site were not likely to be solved by planning officers alone.

There are also human rights issues to consider: the council would not be allowed to make travellers homeless by removing caravans from the site.

To help deal with other problems at the Paddocks, a 'multi-agency' approach is now being

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Delays to site work plan due to lockdown

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taken. Other public bodies involved include Thames Valley Police, the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and Oxfordshire County Council's traveller liaison officer.

These agencies were due to carry out work on the site at the end of October, but because of the second lockdown in England between November 5 and December 2, were unable to do so.

Instead, work is now due to begin in the New Year.

In November this year, an inquest at the Oxfordshire Coroner's Court looked into the circumstances of a woman's death at the Paddocks in June.

Donna Smith, of Bampton, had been placed inside a car at the site in the early hours of June 23, in order to sleep off the 'very large volume' of alcohol she had consumed at a large party that had taken place at the Paddocks.

The care worker's partner checked on her twice during the day – when heatwave temperatures had reached close to 30C – before discovering she had died at about 5.30pm.

Oxfordshire coroner Darren Salter recorded a conclusion of alcohol-related death.



The Paddocks travellers site near Bampton

Picture: Google Maps

TRAGEDY: Mum left to sleep off alcohol but was found unresponsive

Care worker died in heat of car after a huge party

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A MOTHER died after being left in a hot car for 16 hours following a party attended by 'up to 400 people' at a caravan site.

Donna Smith, of Bampton, was placed in the vehicle in the early hours of June 23, to sleep off the 'very large volume' of alcohol she consumed at the event.

The care worker's partner checked on her twice the next day – when temperatures reached close to 30C – before discovering she had died at about 5.30pm.

A police officer at the scene was quoted as saying she had 'cooked to death', but the cause was given as alcohol intoxication at an inquest at Oxford Coroners' Court.

An emotional hearing was attended by five family members, including the 39-year-old's mother, son and sister.



Donna Smith died outside her home at The Paddocks, Bampton. The vehicle pictured is not the car involved. Picture: Google Maps

Her partner, John Whittington, appeared via video link.

The court heard Ms Smith attended an 80th birthday party on the night of June 22 at The Paddocks in Weald Street, Bampton, where she had moved with Mr Whittington three weeks before.

Mr Whittington was DJing at the event, which he said attracted '300 to 400 people' despite Government coronavirus restrictions.

She had been drinking heavily, with a toxicology report finding the amount of alcohol in her blood was six times the legal driving limit.

Mr Whittington told the

inquest that, at about 1am, Ms Smith was 'tired and unsteady on her feet', so he drove his car to the party marquee, to pick her up.

He parked outside their home, but 'couldn't lift her' out so left her to sleep in the front passenger seat.

The court heard Mr Whittington, who had been with his partner for about four-and-a-half years, checked on her at 9am the next day, to find her still asleep.

Ms Smith woke briefly and told him she was cold, so he 'closed the window, but with a bit of air flow through it' before leaving and returning

to find her 'snoring' at 1pm.

Mr Whittington insisted his partner had access to a water bottle in the vehicle, although this detail was absent from his initial police statement. That afternoon he cooked dinner, but discovered her unresponsive at 5.30pm, so attempted CPR and called 999. Paramedics were called.

Investigative officer DC Oliver Harrison said Mr Whittington's 'lack of action' did not amount to criminality.

But Ms Smith's mother, Linda Parker, said in court: "That's not the story in my head. He left her in the car for so long."

DC Harrison apologised for a comment made by colleague Daniel Smith, who said it looked like Ms Smith had 'cooked to death'.

He said: "We're in no place to give a cause of death. The way he's worded that is extremely poor."

Coroner Darren Salter recorded a conclusion of alcohol-related death.

November 4th 2020