

# **EAST LOTHIAN: Private car park set up to tackle 'drug use' at beauty spot**

## **Controversial car park at reservoir gets go ahead**

A commercial car park set up at a popular beauty spot in order to tackle 'drug use, drug moving and sexual activity' has been given permission to remain, despite dozens of complaints.

The owners of The Hopes estate at Hopes Reservoir said increased visits to the area during Covid restrictions had left them having to clean up human faeces and deal with antisocial behaviour and parking problems.

However their attempt to resolve the problem by creating a gated car park which required a monthly £5 permit to use, sparked a wave of protests amid claims 'menacing and intimidating' signs were put up and obstacles installed on the public road to stop people parking on the verge.

Protesters also claimed an informal car park, which people were allowed to park on for free by Scottish Water for decades, suddenly had signs installed banning vehicles, which Scottish Water knew nothing about.

And it was claimed when the public utility firm agreed to fund a sign which confirmed people could park on their land it was torn down.

Moorfoot Capital Management Ltd, who were listed as the applicant, applied for retrospective planning permission for the car park and its 1.1 metre high fence and gates after planning officers investigated the new facility.

At the time the applicant said they did not know permission was needed for the car park.

A meeting of East Lothian Council's planning committee today heard 20 permits a month were available for users to buy from Gifford Post Office at a cost of £5, with money going to the village church.

Representing the applicant, John Wright told the committee that a 'hands off' approach to the area by Scottish Water had led to the new car park being created.

He said: "It is unfortunate that Scottish Water take a hands off approach so the applicant has had to dealing with drug taking, drug moving, sexual activities and picking up human faeces.

"It is not the considerate users of the area but the inconsiderate users who have brought about this situation."

The new car park received 39 letters of objection from residents who claimed signage associated with it was "intimidating and misleading" with claims private road signs had been erected on a public road, a gate had been placed across public access and the car park opening times were restrictive with it open from 9am to 6pm four days a week.

Mr Wright told the committee the car park needed to be closed sometimes as it was used as a sheep gathering point before they are taken for treatment following a "tick explosion" on the hills.

Objector Alastair Shepherd told the committee he had visited The Hopes Reservoir for 26 years and said there had been no evidence of the antisocial behaviour which the applicant claimed had sparked the new car park being built.

He told the committee that in recent weeks he had received reports of people visiting the reservoir and being told they could not park at the Scottish Water site despite it being free and had to use the new gated facility.

He said: "On a walk a few weeks ago I met Reverend Neil Gardner, former chaplain to the Queen, and he had been told he could not park in Scottish Water's car park."

The committee heard that roads officers were investigating claims about illegal signage and obstacles being placed on the public road accessing the site.

Councillors unanimously agreed to grant permission for the new car park but added a condition that it would be open from 8am to 8pm and be closed only on agreement with the local authority with the days it will open to be agreed between the council and the landowner.

Cllr John McMillan, who called in the application to the committee, said he had visited the reservoir for 65 years.

He said: "The system of permits is not inclusive and we need to move out of Covid reaction and Covid recovery and into personal well-being.

"I will approve this application but want to encourage the applicant to accept the increased opening hours.

"If we carry on with the current system we are in danger of discouraging people to visit The Hopes which is a part of our heritage."

*by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter*

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