

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The New Zealand Government has put forward four proposals to try to address concerns with specific areas regarding freedom camping in New Zealand and has asked for submissions on these four proposals and for any other thoughts or issues that are experienced on a local level. This report is Selwyn District Council's submission, which details the successful recipe of stages when considering freedom camping within Selwyn District. It is written from the view point of the end user being both the Customer and the Councils Reserves Operations team.
2. Considerations towards freedom camping in the Selwyn District are made around the following questions; 1) if the proposed site is a reserve and 2) are there toilets present. Utilizing the Reserves Act instead of the Freedom Camping Act ensures that all customers are treated equally and fairly regardless of their reasoning for staying within our freedom camping areas. This approach within Selwyn's four freedom camping Reserves (Coes Ford, Chamberlains Ford, Lakeside Domain and Whitecliffs Domain) is successful and largely well received amongst our customer base. There is a large issue of transient homelessness and this is tightly intertwined with freedom camping in New Zealand. This issue needs to be addressed at the same time as freedom camping issues as it has become a bigger issue than what these proposals address. The transient homeless New Zealander is doing more harm to New Zealand's environment, economy and reputation than the international tourist does. We understand that the Freedom Camping Act wasn't introduced to manage homelessness but we think that it is now time to address the two issues concurrently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) Selwyn District Council supports proposal 2.
- b) Undertake review of Freedom Camping Act to understand if it is creating more issues than its solving throughout New Zealand. Is the Act still fit for purpose?
- c) Concurrently address homelessness when addressing freedom camping.
- d) Continue to support Councils with infrastructure and operational funding.

INTRODUCTION

3. Selwyn District is located between Christchurch City (to the East), Waimakariri District (to the North), Ashburton District (to the South) and Westland District (to the West). Selwyn has had a long proud history of embracing freedom camping. There have been benefits and drawbacks to Selwyn's District's location in terms of freedom camping. We are not a destination location so we are not inundated with campers flocking to our location every day to see a particular landmark but we are used as a thoroughfare from and to the Christchurch airport. Traditionally this has left us with different issues such as abandoned vehicles or a whole vehicle worth of refuse left behind before a vehicle has been sold on.
4. Selwyn District Council has four Reserves (Coes Ford, Chamberlains Ford, Lakeside Domain and Whitecliffs Domain) with dedicated freedom camping areas and doesn't allow freedom camping anywhere else in the District. We do not have a freedom camping bylaw but rely on the Reserves Act for governance and compliance. This is proactively managed by an educational approach with a 7 day a week Council Ranger service during the camping season that undertakes a governance role within the four Reserves and also undertakes roving patrols of areas that we discourage freedom camping. There has been a lot of work undertaken over the last 7 years by Selwyn District Council, working with neighboring property owners to what is acceptable to them and what isn't with freedom camping next to their properties.

5. We have itemized out the steps that we have taken over several years to improve freedom camping within the Selwyn District and some of the issues that we face on a daily basis, so that you may reflect on these and include these with future proposals.

IS THE SITE A RESERVE?

6. We believe that a lot of issues that are associated with freedom camping in NZ can be avoided by concentrating efforts at particular reserves with considerable capacity for freedom camping. This helps keep the customer base central and local, while being able to administer the Reserves Act as well as other applicable Acts. This encourages multi use of the Reserves including picnic/day trip use and with a mix of local and international customers. If Selwyn District Council didn't have the four current reserve areas available for freedom camping, it would acquire land for this purpose. We see this as being a fundamental point in positively managing freedom camping. We do not have any significant issues with freedom campers parking up on the side of the road throughout the District and we have been told by our customer base that this is why. Selwyn is known throughout New Zealand both from the international and the domestic travelers that we have these areas for their use.
7. Day trip use through investing in picnic areas and toilets encourage use of popular but historic freedom camping problem areas without allowing overnight camping is working in Selwyn and people seem to be embracing this. We take this into consideration with our asset renewal programs, to see if there are ways that we can make sites fit both the customers and our expectations within our current budgets.

IS THERE A TOILET PRESENT?

8. Basic infrastructure is needed to match the intended use and capacity of the reserve selected for freedom camping. The numbers of toilet pans and type of toilets available (vaulted or reticulated wastewater) then dictate the daily capacity of each site. This includes self-contained and non-self-contained vehicles as both generally use our facilities. This allows us to keep within our resource consents for our wastewater systems and also have capacity for people who aren't camping to feel welcome to use the facilities.
9. As our sites are in environmentally sensitive areas, we have a range of resource consent conditions which means we have some with mains power, running water and effluent disposal fields and some that are vaulted with no running water and solar power for night lighting. The vaulted toilets have been embraced by customers as much as the flushable systems have and prove that facilities do not need to be lavish to encourage their use.

IS THE RESERVE IN A RURAL AREA?

10. Selwyn's four freedom camping reserves are ideal locations for freedom camping due to their proximity to urban and rural settings. They are urban enough to each be within 15km of a main Selwyn township with full amenities available to them but rural enough to be 'off the beaten track' and be attractive to genuine freedom camping from both international and domestic travelers include local use.
11. Capacity can be managed passively and actively through; sectioning off areas, providing both picnic areas that can only be accessed by pedestrians and by vehicle, signage (directive and interpretative) mix of hard surface and turf areas, daily staff checks with education and enforcement of the Reserves.

12. We have found that the different measures that we have taken have largely been embraced by all customers. Some local customers have expressed negativity of the sectioning off different areas rather than having an entire land mass to occupy, but once explained the reasoning, they understand that it needs to be done.
13. The Freedom camping reserves are actively managed throughout the year and not just during the camping season. We do a mix of leaving some open for use but also closing some to rest the areas so they can recover from the seasons use and to actively manage our capacity. Coes, Chamberlains and Whitecliffs Reserves are on the edge of the Selwyn River, which can periodically flood during the winter from heavy rain in the foothills of the Southern Alps.

CERTIFICATION

14. Proposal 2 as defined with regards to certification (Make it mandatory for freedom campers to stay in a vehicle that is self-contained unless they are staying at a site with toilets) would be the proposal that Selwyn District Council would support. As how we currently manage and support freedom camping within Selwyn, this would utilize the benefits that we have been able to embrace under the Tourism Infrastructure Funding.
15. We have experienced that many international freedom campers purchase their vehicles from one another and then sell their vehicle to fund their plane tickets to move onto their next destination.
16. This is largely undertaken through Facebook pages and word of mouth.
17. There has been a notable shift this last season (likely due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions) towards customers staying in motorhomes and tents instead of cars. Over the Christmas period we had three definite shifts of customers which we haven't had in the past, ones that set up before Christmas for the entire two week period, ones that left our sites on Boxing Day and ones that arrived before New Year's Eve and left after that weekend. The interesting part is that the majority were based in tents and not vehicles as previous years and that a lot of the tents ended up in our bins after the holiday period.

28 DAYS STAY (AS DEFINED BY THE RESERVES ACT)

18. Utilizing the Reserves Act in the freedom camping areas that Selwyn has available for use means that all users are treated the same regardless of their reasoning for staying. This creates fair and consistent rules and accountability across our customer base and sets consistency with education and enforcement from Council staff. There are a number of customers for various reasons whom like to stay more than 28 days.

BREACHES OF RESERVES ACT

19. The common issues that we face in our reserves that we allow freedom camping in are based around people trying to have fires (we do not allow fires in our reserves), people trying to stay longer than 28 days per site, self-entitlement over particular areas in the district (which camping was historically allowed in), some people taking 'ownership' of 'their' space while their camping (being precious with people entering their perceived space), the unauthorized pruning of trees (for firewood and for being able to get taller vehicles into spaces), fly tipping of refuse and noise complaints.

20. Most of these issues can be described as anti-social behavior and we take an education based approach to working with our customers to solve these issues. When this can't be achieved we escalate enforcement utilizing the Reserves Act and Trespass Act. Over the last 12 months there has been 8 trespass orders issued for consistent and escalating antisocial behavior within our four freedom camping reserves.
21. We had used a centralized register in the past which was called the Ambassador App which was designed and supported by Government. It was a proactive way of sharing information nationally about the campers present as they move around the Country. We would support this initiative being rolled out nationally for all Councils to use and to be able to use the data to support their efforts of managing freedom camping for national success.

COST OF MANAGING FREEDOM CAMPING IN CAMPING AREAS

22. The ability to apply for and be successful to both the Tourism Infrastructure Funding and the Responsible Camping Initiatives has bolstered Selwyn's ability to provide for an increasing demand for freedom camping in the District. This has allowed us to improve our facilities including toilets, dump stations, picnic areas, signage, refuse and wastewater removal, education and enforcement. This in conjunction with Council investment, has lifted the quality of the freedom camping reserves and we have seen a positive change in attitude towards use in these areas over the last several years.
23. Asset investment is directly linked to how customers view and use an area. Infrastructure needs to be fit for purpose and suit the environment for customers to embrace and respect what your expectations are of them. Installation of toilets for example, doesn't mean that people will use them, there needs to be consideration to the areas as a whole to what is wanted to be achieved and alternatives offered. We offer areas in Selwyn that you can do things rather than you can't, the view of "if not here, then where?"
24. There are rising operational costs with maintaining newly installed infrastructure, for example public dump stations. There is increasing demand for public dump stations throughout New Zealand and we receive these requests in Selwyn as well. The current systems are being utilized largely by the internal customer and require funding to constantly empty. We have seen a lift in this area this year compared to previous years and is likely due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions. This lift in use will likely remain while internal tourism is nationally advertised and Selwyn fully supports this.

HOMELESSNESS

25. There has historically been issues with homelessness within our Freedom Camping Reserves. They come from all walks of life and for all sorts of reasons. We have had a large mix of Grey Nomads (older generations of Kiwis whom have sold up their property, bought a traveling vehicle and now live in this vehicle full time), the travelling seasonal worker and transient homeless (Kiwis). They are all welcome in our spaces as much as any tourist and we educate and enforce under the Reserves Act the same as any of our other customers. Under freedom camping rules, they are not freedom campers however some cannot be easily distinguished from freedom campers. For consistency between, customers, sites and staff, we use the Reserves Act for governance.

26. We have found that there are an increasing number of Grey Nomads and transient homeless that are now looking for more permanent places to stay for free. We are increasingly spending more of our time with education and enforcement each season with these two groups of people rather than freedom campers (International and Domestic) themselves. We have very few issues now on an annual basis of our customers conducting anti-social behavior within our District, most of our issues come from our internal customer, whom aren't freedom campers. We have found that how freedom camping and social issues are managed by our neighboring Councils, has an impact on our customer base both international and domestic, camping and homeless. We have found that very few of our homeless customers actually come from Selwyn.
27. We would like these issues to be taken into consideration now when addressing freedom camping as freedom camping and homelessness are intertwined and need to be addressed concurrently.

COMMENTS FROM CAMPERS

Personally made to our Reserves Rangers

"We have great freedom camping facilities for people to use in Selwyn and they really are appreciated. The amount of positive feedback we get makes the investment of our time really worthwhile."

Some common themes campers express to me their appreciation for are:

- Daily Ranger visits help campers feel secure. These and the 24 hour helpline number give a point of contact for any questions and feedback
- Well maintained high quality spaces, great toilets, friendly staff/service
- Free camping spaces, many visitors ask if there is a way that they can make a payment/donation to show their appreciation
- Ability to offload rubbish and recycling
- We do not require self-contained vehicles within our reserve camping areas
- Great locations, good views, dark skies, great birdlife
- Close to town center's for grocery shopping and washing
- Lots of space
- Dog (and cat) friendly, great that they can be off leash
- 28 day stay limit
- There is a choice of reserves to stay in
- NZ visitors from out of the Selwyn District often express the wish that their council would provide such spaces and services.

From Campermate App

The below comments have been sourced directly from Campermate and have only been altered for spelling. These relate to our four freedom camping reserves and describe our customer's thoughts about our sites.

Chamberlains Ford

08.03.2021	It's a good site, a real shame they have blocked off so much. A couple of years back you could stay anywhere. There are some 'interesting' people who seem to live there semi-permanently. Didn't have any trouble but something to consider.
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15.02.2021	Place is ok, but a few odd people around and rubbish laying in the bushes. Toilets are full of mosquitoes, but besides that clean.
05.01.2021	Best free camp ever visited There are a few toilets and sinks There are rubbish bins There was a family-vibe when I was there.
03.03.2020	Very difficult for Kiwis living on the road to get buses and large caravans into the very few camping sites. Seems to be set up for tourists and people living in small vehicles. The bollards and wire rope fences could cause a problem in case of an emergency. Seems to me that New Zealanders are being placed second to the Tourists. Very difficult for large caravans and buses to access the very few camping areas.
17.02.2020	Awesome campsite, toilets were cleaned every day, garbage disposal, good phone signal, 30m from Christchurch centre, level grounds, really big, sinks for dishes, BBQ and picnic area. And free! Highly recommend.
14.12.2019	Excellent free campsite. The area is very spacious and you can camp wherever you want (inside the signposted areas). I had the impression, that a lot of freshly arrived campers from Christchurch airport spent their first night here, so there might be some traffic at around midnight, but we didn't mind. Can recommend this place for a free stay near Christchurch.
29.10.2018	Very big campsite lots of parking, quiet and well sheltered from the wind, clean toilets and somewhere to wash your dishes but not for drinking, also has a small sheltered area with picnic tables, very good for a free camping site has everything you need and more.

Whitecliffs Domain

17.04.2021	Such a sweet free camp! Beautiful surroundings, lots of space and excellent amenities ;). Thank you so much!
28.03.2021	This is a wonderful site. The toilets are long drop but beautifully maintained. There are some sand flies so don't forget your spray, etc. Well worth the gold coin donation.
13.02.2021	Gorgeous place to stay. Toilets clean. Rubbish collection. Close to river. A large area with plenty of room. Thank you for providing and caring for this great camping spot.
12.01.2021	Very lovely and quite place. Toilets were super clean, I've never seen that clean drop toilets. There's a sink to clean your dishes and enough space for everyone. The only issue would be the lack of cell reception if you rely on it.
20.01.2020	Our second stop to this camp and has secured its place as my best free camp in NZ. Water tap, sink for washing, Toilets are amazing, pretty, quiet spot by the river, choose a nice place with access to river and enjoy the peace here. Only thing is the reception is not good, so you can't rely on that. See you next summer Whitecliffs. Thank you Selwyn District Council.
09.11.2019	Honestly our favorite campsite yet! And we've been in New Zealand for about 3 months now. The swimming hole is perfect for a refreshing dip and playing in the water, we wish we had tubes to float down from the spot up the road. Definitely stay if you're contemplating. Bathrooms are really nice and sink for dishes is a huge plus!
23.12.2018	Really nice big free campsite, right next to the river. Plenty of shaded spaces for hot days but does get very muddy after heavy rain. Toilets are spotless and no sand flies or mosquitos.

Lakeside Domain

01.04.2021	Super nice campsite, beautiful sunrise in the morning, great views. New toilet block was very clean, plenty of space to park. Mayflies don't bite so all good.
27.11.2020	Fantastic spot! Really HUGE grassy area surrounded by the water and subdivided into smaller, more private areas by tall trees. Brand new and very clean flush toilets and some taps if running water in place. Dump station with drinkable water available a few kilometers away in the pleasant town of Leeston. DO NOT SWIM IN THE WATER WITHOUT CHECKING THE LEVEL OF TOXIC ALGAE!! (SIGN AT THE ENTRY). Harmless mosquitoes.
04.07.2019	Place is great super quiet and great views felt safe here as a solo traveler. Toilets are clean loads of space was surprised to see a few other backpackers here worth it!
30.03.2018	Large area. Plenty of vehicle spaces and tree wind breaks to hide behind - which we needed as the weather was not so good. Facilities clean and as described, though we were in self-contained van so not so important to us. We stopped here due to it being an easy/close location to Christchurch after flying in and collecting van that afternoon. Perfect for a night stop over. Can imagine would be a nice spot in good weather.

Coes Ford

04.04.2021	Great wee spot very quiet and well looked after. Three massive campsites. All they ask is a gold coin donation for night stay. Donation box at campsite one.
19.03.2021	Loved this campsite! Clean toilets, no bugs at all, beautiful stargazing, and plenty of space for tents and campers alike. If it had reception I think people would never leave!
08.03.2021	One of the best campsites I've found. Heaps of space. Thank you to SDC for this great facility.
20.05.2020	Stayed here during lockdown. Could not have found anything better and SDC has done a fabulous job of looking after everyone. Best freedom camping area we've stayed at and better than many paid sites. We'll be back for sure.
06.12.2019	Brilliant campsite! Clean (flush) toilets with an area to wash your dishes outside. BBQ area looks nice & plenty of space for campers to get a nice sheltered spot under a tree. There's also big skips to dump your refuse.
01.08.2018	Stayed here 3 nights in our camper (not self-contained). Selwyn council has been extremely generous with this large and free facility, complete with large m/f washrooms and an accessible washroom, all well-lit. There are also multiple water taps, and a large outdoor sink that could be used for dishwashing. As a bonus, there is a black kitty that roams around in the evening who is very friendly and will stop for head scratches. Also, rangers come by every day to maintain the facility. In short, I highly recommend this generous facility, and encourage people to leave a donation in the box outside of the washroom if you are able.

12 May 2020

Ministry of Business, Innovation
and Employment
15 Stout Street
PO Box 1473
WELLINGTON 6140

Attn: Responsible Camping Submissions
Email: responsiblecamping@mbie.govt.nz

Dear Sir/Madam

SUBMISSION - SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE FREEDOM CAMPING

Council would like to thank MBIE for the opportunity to make a submission on the discussion document 'Supporting Sustainable Freedom Camping in Aotearoa New Zealand'.

This matter has been considered by the Council at its meeting on 12 May 2021 and the attached document forms the Council's submission on this matter.

Yours sincerely

Privacy of natural
persons

Sam Broughton
MAYOR