Community Services Select Committee
21 March 2012
Update on Gypsies and Travellers
Report by Interim Director of Joint Commissioning Unit

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to

i. Consider and advise the Cabinet Member on the preferred options for the future development and maintenance of West Sussex’s gypsies and traveller sites the authority should adopt.

ii. Consider and determine how scrutiny of services in general for Gypsies and Travellers should be taken forward in the future.

1. Background

1.1 This report provides an update on the progress made by the Gypsy and Traveller Team following on from the Select Committee item in January 2011.

1.2 A review of the service provided by the Gypsy and Traveller Team completed during 2010/11 recommended that the role of the Site Managers be refocused to place a greater emphasis on working with the communities to pro-actively help reduce the inequalities that these communities experience.

1.3 Following consultations with both staff and residents, these recommendations were adopted during 2011/12 and resulted in the number of Resident Site Managers being reduced from six to three.

1.4 It has been recognised that the County Council has no statutory duty to develop and maintain Gypsy and Traveller Sites. The Housing Act 2004 places the responsibility on Local Housing Authorities (district and borough councils) to undertake periodic needs assessments and ultimately provide suitable and appropriate Gypsy and Traveller accommodation. Running and managing what is, in effect, social housing is not a core activity of the County Council, and consequently the organisation is concerned it may not always have the breadth of housing management skills that are found in large social housing providers.

1.5 Income from rents has been insufficient to cover running costs of Gypsy and Traveller sites (staffing, repairs, grounds maintenance etc) and the service’s share of corporate overheads. Traditionally the budget required from the Council to run the sites has been in the region of £150,000 per annum, reducing to around £50,000 following the recent restructuring of the service.
As a result, the following three options are currently being explored. Other county councils have also been undertaking similar exercises, with Hampshire County Council looking to its district and borough councils to take over the sites, and Somerset County Council has recently sold all of its sites to a company owned by Gypsies.

For the management of the sites to remain within the County Council, with a continuing drive to improve cost-effectiveness and continuing initiatives to help the residents to achieve better outcomes in terms of health, education and social integration.

Approach other bodies; including the district and borough councils, registered social landlords and specialist management companies to become managers of the Council’s sites. This will be by way of a management contract where the Council specifies the range of services and support that it wants for its residents.

Seek alternative owners who will manage the sites as well. Clearly any sale or lease arrangements would include covenants to protect residents’ interests, and there would need to be a balance between achieving the biggest capital receipt and the most effective management arrangements.

Cabinet has agreed that the Council should carry out a market consultation exercise to assist in the appraisal of the three options. Running in parallel will be wider stakeholder consultation including district, borough and parish councils as well as the site managers and current tenants. The latter will be supported by the two local traveller support groups Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) and Sussex Travellers Action Group (STAG). It is anticipated that this process will be completed by the end of April. The results will then be presented to the Cabinet in May, and it will be asked to make a decision on which option it prefers. If the preferred option is not for the County Council to continue to manage the sites, then it is anticipated that the resulting outsourcing process will be completed by April 2013.

Developments of Sites

Fairplace Hill Site in Burgess Hill provides nine pitches for Gypsy families. For a number of years negotiations have been ongoing with the owners of the land to relocate/re-provide this site. Planning permission has been recently granted to the owners by Mid Sussex District Council and includes the relocation of the site within the development.

Once this was granted, the County Council was able to apply to the Home and Communities Agency for a grant to develop the site. The County Council has recently been advised that it has secured a grant of £400,000. The new site will consist of nine pitches for Gypsies and a plot for a resident manager. The owners have granted the County Council a 30-year lease at a peppercorn rent and the Council anticipates that the site will be completed by 2015. Residents will then have a brand new site of at least the same standard as all other sites managed by the County Council.
1.9 The Travellers Team continues to work closely with the FFT and STAG, two local organisations who work with Gypsies and Travellers. Three of the 10 sites have regular residents’ meetings which are attended by residents, Police, Fire Service, representatives from Children’s and Family Centres, the library service, Health Visitors and both County and District or Borough Council Elected Members. Through these meetings residents can raise concerns over site issues and meet other service providers. As a direct result of these meetings, some families from the sites now attend the local Children and Family Centres, relationships have been built with the local police, and library buses have been visiting, providing books to the sites. Residents on the other sites are being encouraged to have similar residents’ forums.

1.10 Since the report in 2011 and the Health Needs Assessment, there is active support from the Public Health Department to assist in ensuring that statutory services are fully engaging with the staff and residents of the sites to ensure that tenants can pro-actively access services.

1.11 The County Council continues to deal with illegal encampments throughout the county, either on Highway or land owned by the County Council. Since April 2012 there have been 40 reports of such encampments, of these, 15 resulted in court action being commenced, with the remainder moving off after service of the initial Notice. Only 15 of these encampments were Gypsies and Travellers with the remainder being persons choosing to live in vehicles or tents.

2. **Equality - Customer Focus Appraisal**

2.1 A Customer Focus Appraisal will be provided when the full report is presented to Cabinet.

3. **Resource Implications and Value for Money**

Alternative arrangements for the management of the sites may well result in the future management of the sites being cost neutral to the Council as has been demonstrated elsewhere in the country.

4. **Risk Management Implications**

Not Applicable

5. **Crime and Disorder Act Implications**

Not evidenced in this report

6. **Human Rights Act Implications**

Gypsy and Traveller’s are recognised as an ethnic group under Race Relations and Equalities Legislation.
Appendix

Map of the sites

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Background Papers - None