

Joint Area Committee – North 28 October 2009

10. Accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers in Area North – update report

Head of Service
Lead /Officer
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Purpose of the Report

To provide a brief summary of current activity to provide accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers in Area North, as a basis for discussion by the Area Committee. This report is based on the Item for Information provided to the Joint Area Committee in September 2009.

Further information will be provided to councillors to accompany this report providing contact details for services, which relate to the gypsy and traveller community.

The report will be presented by Les Collett, Community Development Officer, members are asked to contact Les with any further queries, to ensure additional questions can be answered on the day.

Recommendation(s)

1. That members note and comment on the report, and highlight any aspects for further or future consideration, by the Joint Area Committee or other SSDC forum and identify further questions for a written answer from the relevant service manager or portfolio holder.
2. That members note that progress of the Park Homes project at Chubbards Cross and Tintinhull will be reported quarterly to the Area Committee through the Finance and Area Development Plan reports.

Background

The travelling community has been a traditional part of rural life in South Somerset and across the region for hundreds of years. Historically, Gypsies and Travellers have lived comparatively peacefully alongside other local households and have provided an important economic manpower resource by travelling to where seasonal agricultural work or construction work was needed. The changes in employment opportunities, health considerations and educational need alongside the removal of traditional stopping places has impacted dramatically the lives of the travelling community over the past thirty years and forced a more settled lifestyle.

Report

Management of SSDC sites, and planned major refurbishment

South Somerset District Council manages two permanent Gypsy and Traveller sites, one at Chubbards Cross, near Ilton, with six pitches and one at Marsh Lane, Tintinhull with eight pitches, which were transferred from the County Council in 2002.

SSDC employs a part-time site manager, who works as part of the Housing and Welfare service. A wide variety of services are involved in ensuring that the sites are maintained and managed, and that site residents are able to access the services they need. It has

been recognised that the management of both sites is a challenging service to do well, however SSDC remains committed to improving the quality of life for residents on these two sites, through its own services, and in partnership with others.

The Community Development Officer (North) attends the sites management liaison group, led by the Housing & Welfare team, together with representatives of Property Services, and the Community Liaison Officer (Paul Goltz). The group makes recommendations to senior managers as required, and is reviewing a variety of management issues on a priority basis. These have included the application of licence conditions, and communications with other local services.

With the benefit of Government funding, SSDC has planned a major refurbishment of both sites, and the plan includes the provision of Park Homes. Further details of this project are included in a report to District Executive in September – noted in the background papers at the end of this report.

Following the successful completion of this major project, the Tintinhull site will remain at 8 pitches and Chubbards Cross will be expanded to 10 pitches (from six), both within the scope of existing planning permissions. Residents of the two sites are fully involved in this project. The SSDC Project Board managing this project will provide further information as the project progresses, and is monitored quarterly by District Executive. The Community Development Officer (North) attends the project board meetings.

Increasing the provision of pitches to meet local needs in South Somerset

There is a legal requirement that local councils make provision for Gypsy and Traveller accommodation, including both residential and transit pitches. This could be achieved through the granting of planning consent for private sites, or through sites managed by the local council or other body.

The Housing Act 2004 places the responsibility for identifying and meeting accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers onto local housing authorities. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires that these accommodation requirements be identified through the Regional Spatial Strategy, in accordance with the findings of the local needs assessments. This is in addition to work undertaken in the normal course of the development management services of a local planning authority.

Following local needs assessments carried out across Somerset, SSDC's adopted Corporate Plan has a stated aim as follows:

3.9 Increase the number of gypsy & traveller residential pitches to 20 and transit (temporary) pitches to 10 in the District by 2011.

Granting planning permissions for sites follows the usual approach to assess sites suitability for the nature and impact of the proposed development. Further information on the criteria used to assess suitability, are available from the Development Management team.

Permission has recently been granted for four pitches at Fivehead and for two additional (non-personal) pitches at Pitney Hill, thus reducing the target to 24, of which 14 must be residential. Should further planning permission be forthcoming on privately sponsored sites, the shortfall to be met will reduce further.

In 2008, following a successful bid, central government allocated South Somerset £150k specifically requested to acquire an existing site with planning permission in Area North

(Pitney Hill). Negotiations are proceeding to acquire this land. If successfully acquired, it is probable that the site will be allocated and leased to an extended household. Occupation of this site will take place after the lease conditions have been agreed.

Within the same successful bid, a further £100k was awarded (and an additional £50k has been made available from the SSDC corporate capital programme) as a land acquisition fund.

The opportunity to acquire sites, and achieve planning consent for a pitch has prompted a review of the corporate process to acquire land for the provision of a pitch for gypsy and traveller accommodation.

The SSDC District Executive recently approved a process for the acquisition of land for the purpose of Gypsy and Traveller Provision, which will be submitted to Full Council later this year. A copy of the report and process can be viewed on line using the following link:

<http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=40008>

Local community engagement – links with parish councils

Following a request for local discussions between parish councils and the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Environmental Health and Inclusion, three informal meetings have been held during October in Lopen, Merriott and Hinton St George. These have been open meetings, supported by officers from Area Development and Development Management teams. Ward members and County members were also invited to attend. Feedback from these meetings will be provided as part of the presentation of this report. The purpose of the meetings were to provide a two-way exchange of information through questions and answers, relating to policy or practical issues; coupled with a presentation which highlighted the particular needs and cultural history of Gypsies and Travellers.

Planning and enforcement issues for unauthorised use of land

From time to time, the Development Management service and Housing services will work together to address issues of unauthorised use of land for residential use or for temporary stays, by Gypsies and Travellers. Further information on the approach used, or to raise questions on enforcement procedures can be provided on request.

Financial Implications

None from this report

Implications for Corporate Priorities

3.9 Increase the number of gypsy & traveller residential pitches to 20 and transit (temporary) pitches to 10 in the District by 2011.

Background Papers: *District Executive – 3rd September 2009 Provision of Park Homes*
District Executive – 1st October 2009 Process to acquire land for purpose of Gypsy and Traveller provision