

Scrutiny Committee – 7 May 2013

7. Gypsy Site Management

Exec.Portfolio Holder: Cllr Ric Pallister (Housing, Environmental Health & Inclusion)
Assistant Director Steve Joel, Assistant Director (Health and Well-Being)
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Purpose of the Report

1. To update Members on the site management arrangements for the Council's Gypsy Sites.

Forward Plan

2. This report has been part of the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan following the District Executives September 2009 decision to approve the purchase of park homes and associated site refurbishment works for the families residing at the Chubbards Cross and Marsh Lane sites.

Public Interest

3. The Council has a statutory duty to provide Gypsy and Traveller residential and transit pitches.
4. There is a need to monitor the site management arrangements to ensure the sites are managed in the best way and at the lowest possible cost to the Council.

Recommendation

5. That Members note the site management arrangements.

Background

6. In 2002 The Council took over the management of Chubbards Cross, Ilton and Marsh Lane, Tintinhull from Somerset County Council. The Council then successfully bid for central government money to help us bring the sites up to a decent standard.
7. After receiving the money from central government in 2009 the District Executive approved the purchase of up to 18 park homes and the associated site refurbishment.
8. The Scrutiny Committee requested annual updates, and last considered the site management arrangements in February 2012.

Areas of Scrutiny

9. 10 areas were previously identified by members of the Scrutiny Committee in 2012 and these have been used to inform the preparation of this report. The position on each area is set out below.

Management Issue	Position
(1) Have all tenants signed their tenancy agreements?	<p>Yes. All residents signed new agreements before occupation of their new Park Homes or Pitches. As a result of amendments to the Mobile Homes Act, agreements were reviewed and enhanced, and the duties and responsibilities of both the Council and residents revised, prior to first issue in May 2011.</p> <p>All new residents to the sites have also signed a tenancy agreement</p>
(2) Are rent charges still in-line with Local Housing Allowance rates?	<p>Yes, and rent charges are reviewed annually in February, with changes applying from 1st April.</p>
(3) Are the tenants paying their rent liability?	<p>Yes, residents are paying their rent liability. Rent accounts are monitored regularly and residents invoiced for any amount not covered by Housing Benefit.</p>
(4) Are the tenants continuing to pay their water and utility charges?	<p>All tenants are aware that their water is metered. The site management team monitors usage and residents are invoiced. There has been a delay in invoices going out. We have now reviewed the procedure to ensure residents are invoiced promptly.</p> <p>The Gypsy Site Officer has given all residents practical advice on the economic use of water and we are encouraging all residents to pay for their water using direct debit.</p> <p>We are also making a fresh approach to South West Water seeking to have residents charged directly for their water to minimise the risk to SSDC and reduce the amount of officer time required to administer the bills. In refurbishing the sites individual metered supplies were connected to each plot but the Water Authority refused to individually charge each resident. This leaves SSDC with no option but to pay the composite bill for the site as had been the case since handover from SCC, but recovering the costs from each resident based on their meter reading.</p> <p>Residents procure and pay suppliers directly for electricity and gas.</p>
(5) Are the sites fully occupied?	<p>Yes</p>

<p>(6) Previously it was reported that there were good relationships with the PCSO. Is this still the case?</p>	<p>Yes. The site management team continues to benefit from the support of the Police. The Police attend site management team meetings and there is regular dialogue between us regarding site management issues.</p> <p>The PCSO has also assisted the Council in the January 2013 district-wide Gypsy and Traveller caravan count.</p>
<p>(7) What have the total maintenance costs been, has this been met within the agreed budget?</p>	<p>For the year 2012/13, maintenance costs totalled £44,563, however, overall the sites delivered an operating surplus of £11,141.</p> <p>Main areas of spend are:-</p> <p>£8364.68 on routine pump maintenance £7357.77 on site maintenance inc Fly tip removal £1118.41 on Cooker Repairs £5958.60 on Void turnaround works to Park Homes £8047.19 on routine maintenance to Park Homes</p> <p>Maintenance costs included repairs to the barriers, water leaks, electric sockets, leaking toilets and dripping taps.</p> <p>The site management team has identified that the cookers originally provided with the Park Homes were requiring frequent repairs. Ownership of the cookers has now been transferred to the residents who now have the option to keep these cookers or replace them with their own. This brings the Council in line with all of our partner landlords.</p> <p>The site management team will be raising residents' awareness about the cost of site and property maintenance by:</p> <p>Issuing a maintenance manual (to enhance the details about repairs already given in the site handbooks).</p> <p>Recharging all residents for any responsive work on communal areas for which no individual resident appears responsible.</p>
<p>(8) Are there any on-going costs to the Council? If there are please detail these.</p>	<p>Yes, there is a need for the Council to plan for the future replacement of the Park Homes. To achieve this the service will transfer a sum of £22,1760 from rent charges into a specific Gypsy Site Reserve. This sum transferred is adjusted in take account of inflation and condition assessments.</p>

(9) What is the current condition of the sites? Are there any issues with vandalism or Anti-social behaviour?

Tintinhull site is in good condition.

In November 2012 a Park Home property, while empty, was subject to malicious damage. There was not enough evidence to ascertain who had been responsible to enable legal action to be taken.

The Ilton site has recently been subject to fly tipping. The site management team is working with Somerset Waste Partnership and with Somerset County Council to resolve this. This is a recurrence of a previous problem on the site which had largely disappeared. All residents are being warned that continued fly tipping will result in the costs for any clearance and disposal, where no individual resident appears responsible, being recovered through a supplementary management charge payable by every resident

The site management team has served a 'Notice to Remedy A Breach of Agreement' on two tenants on the Ilton site. This is the last stage before applying to the Court for an order for possession (eviction).

Members should be assured that the site management team employs a range of tools and approaches to ensure our residents have a safe and pleasant place to live, and that authorised visitors have easy and safe access at all times. These include:

(1) Acceptable Behaviour Contracts. We have successfully used an ABC to prevent further antisocial behaviour caused by one family.
 (2) Regular site visits by the Gypsy Site and Liaison Officer and by the Police.

(3) Good working relationships with our partner agencies including the emergency services, Social Services and the RSPCA.

(4) Providing positive feedback to residents. The site management team will always acknowledge and encourage good behaviour on our sites.

(5) Residents' Handbook. Tailored to the individual sites, the handbooks contain useful practical information about site safety, repairs and the importance of the tenancy agreement. The handbooks, along with a blank copy of the tenancy agreement, will also be sent to prospective applicants to ensure they are aware

	of what the Council expects from them as tenants.
(10) What is the current condition of the Park Homes are they still expected to meet the original projected life expectancy?	The majority of the Park Homes are in good condition and are expected to meet the original 30 year projected life expectancy. One property is in a poor condition but the tenant is subject to a Notice to Remedy A Breach of Agreement'.

In conclusion, members can be re-assured that the sites are being managed well. Key risks and issues are monitored frequently and are under control.

Other Implications

None.

- Background Papers:**
- *SSDC Gypsy and Traveller Sites Brief*
 - *DX Report - The purchase of Park Homes for Gypsy families residing on the sites at Chubbards Cross, Ilton and Marsh Lane, Tintinhull – 3rd September 2009*
 - *DX Report – Park Home Progress Report – April 2010*
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