

Scrutiny Committee – 3 June 2014

7. Gypsy Site Management

Executive Portfolio Holder: Cllr Ric Pallister (Portfolio Holder for Housing, Environmental Health & Inclusion)
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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 May 2013.

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. Before moving into a Park Home or onto a pitch a tenancy agreement must be signed.</p> <p>The current tenancy agreement is very long and difficult to understand. We are working with the legal team to produce a new, clear English 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> <p>However, several residents have been impacted by the “bedroom tax”, this has meant the Welfare Benefits Team working with residents to apply for discretionary housing payment. Unfortunately we do not have any one bedroom park homes for residents to downsize into.</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.</p> <p>We have 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. Residents procure and pay suppliers directly for electricity and gas.</p>
(5) Are the sites fully occupied?	<p>The Tintinhull site is fully occupied. The Ilton site currently has two pitch-only vacancies.</p>
(6) Previously it was reported that there were good relationships with the PCSO. Is this still the case?	<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 Police assisted the Council in the January 2014 district-wide Gypsy and Traveller caravan count.</p>

Management Issue	Position
<p>(7) What have the total maintenance costs been, has this been met within the agreed budget?</p>	<p>For the year 2013/14, maintenance costs totalled £42,609 however; overall the sites delivered an operating surplus of £32,400 which has been moved to the park home reserve fund.</p> <p>Main areas of spend are:-</p> <p>£4682.78 on routine pump maintenance £3271.10 on rubbish removal. £5585.22 on plastic shower splash backs due to a fault with water running behind tiles and causing damaged to the wall behind. £7605.29 on Void turnaround works to Park Homes</p> <p>Maintenance costs included repairs to the barriers, water leaks, electric sockets, leaking toilets and dripping taps.</p> <p>We also recharge 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 £32,400 from rent charges into a specific Gypsy Site Reserve. This sum transferred is adjusted in take account of inflation and condition assessments.</p>
<p>(9) What is the current condition of the sites? Are there any issues with vandalism or Anti-social behaviour?</p>	<p>Both the Tintinhull and Ilton sites are in good condition.</p> <p>The site management team served a 'Notice to Remedy A Breach of Agreement' on one resident on the Tintinhull site. The resident has largely complied with the Notice.</p> <p>The team also served a 'Notice to Remedy a Breach of Agreement' on one resident on the Ilton site, and Court action is proceeding.</p> <p>Members should be assured that the site management team works closely with our partner agencies to ensure our residents have a safe and pleasant place to live, and that authorised visitors have easy and safe access at all times. Our actions include:</p> <p>(1) Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABC). Working with the Police, we successfully used an ABC to stop antisocial behaviour being caused by a family.</p> <p>(2) Regular site visits by the Gypsy Site and Liaison Officer and by the Police.</p> <p>(3) Good working relationships with other emergency</p>

Management Issue	Position
	<p>services and Social Services and Traveller Education.</p> <p>(4) Working closely with the RSPCA to act on any animal welfare concerns, and to improve use and management of land adjacent to the Tintinhull site.</p> <p>(5) Providing positive feedback to residents. The site management team will always acknowledge and encourage good behaviour on our sites.</p> <p>(6) 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.</p>
<p>(10) What is the current condition of the Park Homes are they still expected to meet the original projected life expectancy?</p>	<p>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. Work has been carried out to protect the Park Home.</p>

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

10. 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