

Minutes

Community Services Scrutiny Panel

Town Hall, Tuesday 13th June 2006 at 5.30pm

Present: Councillors Howarth (in the Chair), Hepplewhite, Kinghorn, Moderate, Norman, Robinson, Walton, Wolstenholme and Young

Also Present: Councillors Carr, Cowper, Dickie, Gibbon, Graham, Kellett, Marsden, Pape, Pitts, Simpson, and Stoddart.

Councillor D Southwell	- Portfolio Holder for Housing
Councillor C Woods	- Portfolio Holder for Environment & Leisure
Mr S McInally	- Manager, Travellers Liaison Service, Durham County Council
Mr G Scott	- Policy & Regeneration Manager, City of Durham

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Hopgood and Griffin.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17th May 2006, were confirmed as a correct record, subject to it being noted that the Minutes of the previous meeting, which were confirmed as correct were the Minutes of the Meeting held on 11th April 2006 and not 15th March as stated, and that Any Other Business was in fact Agenda Item No. 4, and not No. 7 as stated.

3. Gypsy/Traveller Sites

Councillor Southwell, Portfolio Holder for Housing, advised Member about the site at West Rainton. All vans were static and residents are registered. They pay rent and rates and water is metered. There was a site manager.

Questions were asked about the name of the manager, the total number of vans and whether all occupants were on the electoral roll. Councillor Southwell advised that that information could be supplied after the meeting.

The Manager of Durham County Council's Travellers Liaison Service was in attendance to give a presentation to Members on the Scrutiny topic of Gypsy/Travellers Sites.

Members were advised that there were 6 sites within County Durham, with only Adventure Lane, West Rainton being in City of Durham District. These permanent sites have washing and toilet facilities; some may have washing machines and microwaves.

The County Council's Travellers Liaison Services has 4 members of staff who are responsible for site management, deal with unauthorised encampments and are responsible for policy development.

The Service has many challenges. Previously, 'toleration' not 'acceptance' was the policy, however there is a requirement to balance the needs of travellers alongside those of the settled community. There were also statutory educational requirements to be taken into account, along with the sometimes poor quality of facilities on offer. There had also been a lack of confidence in the County

Council from the travelling community; this was improving slowly. There had been cases of travellers contacting the Service to advise of their locations. The County Council could provide portaloos at unauthorised encampments, and arrange for refuse collection as this could often prove to be more cost effective than cleaning up the site once travellers had moved on.

The Travellers Liaison Service tries to obtain information on all unauthorised encampments. This information was used when making a decision as to whether to ask travellers to move on. Unauthorised encampments could occur as there was a lack of provision, and also there were inconsistent levels of demand, particularly for transit sites. No matter where encampments were, they could cause problems with local communities. The County Council were looking at 'zones of acceptance' where encampments would be permitted on a temporary basis – if encampments were set up on unsuitable sites, travellers could be asked to move onto an acceptable site.

Travellers living in caravans at the roadside are classed as homeless. Members enquired as to why, if someone chooses to live in a caravan, are they classed as homeless. They were advised that this was a very complex issue, involving the Homelessness Act, and definitions of gypsies and travellers.

Durham County Council try to avoid having to take legal action to move travellers on, however recently at Byers Garth, a Magistrates' Court Order had to be obtained. If travellers claim to have reasons to stay, these have to be investigated. The Police will generally only become involved if there is a risk of civil disorder.

The County Council will be carrying out an accommodation needs assessment which will take approximately one year. Members were advised that building more sites would be unlikely to resolve the problem of unauthorised encampments. The County Council were aware that additional sites were needed, but until this survey has been completed, the number of additional pitches, locations etc. were unknown. One of the main difficulties in providing additional sites was in identifying the land. There also had to be consideration of whether to provide permanent or transit facilities.

Note: Councillors Robinson and Southwell left the Meeting at 6.45pm

The Chair noted that there was a need to talk to the travelling community to decide the best way of dealing with these issues, rather than building sites and hoping they would be used.

Note: Councillors Kellett and Marsden left the Meeting at 6.50pm

Members noted that the County Council had experience in dealing with gypsies and travellers and considered whether it would be appropriate to let them deal with these issues. The Policy and Regeneration Manager advised that the City Council, as Planning Authority and Housing Provider was also under an obligation to consider how best it could become involved if the need was there.

The Chair thanked Scott McNally and the Portfolio Holders for attending, and advised that this topic would be discussed in much more details at future meetings.

4. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

The Meeting terminated at 6.55 pm