

## Minutes

### Community Services Scrutiny Panel

Town Hall, Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2006 at 5.30pm

**Present:** Councillors Howarth (in the Chair), Griffin, Kinghorn, Moderate, Robinson, Taylor, Walton and Young

**Also Present:** Councillors Cowper and Woods.

Lynne Boyd	- Housing Manager
Gavin Scott	- Policy & Regeneration Manager
Neil Laws	- Environmental Health Manager
Scott McNally	- Welfare Rights & Travellers Liaison Team Manager (DCC)
Richard O'Neill	- Travellers Representative

#### 1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Hopgood, Norman and Wolstenholme.

#### 2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2006 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to it being noted that Councillor Griffin had submitted his apologies for absence.

#### 3. Gypsy/Traveller Sites

Following a request by Members at the last meeting of the Panel, the Environmental Health Manager circulated information on the total number of caravan sites in the District, together with their pitch provision. This information is attached at Appendix A. Details of unauthorised encampments in the District over the last two years would be circulated prior to the next meeting.

Richard O'Neill introduced himself. He explained that he was born on a caravan site in Easington Colliery, and is now a consultant who works with organisations around the country on Gypsy and Traveller issues. He is also involved in storytelling days in schools. He tried to make people aware of the Gypsy and Traveller culture and solve problems, which can be caused by negative attitudes portrayed in the media.

He advised Members that about 80% of Gypsies and Travellers in the North East are North Easterners themselves. Some were settled and travelled for only parts of the year.

Members questioned why Local Authorities were required to provide sites for Gypsies and Traveller, yet there was no requirement to provide pitches for holiday caravans. They were advised that this was because Local Authorities had a duty to provide accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers, as they would for any other part of the community. There was no requirement to provide holiday accommodation i.e. pitches for holiday caravans.

The media had a perception of Gypsies and Travellers, and tended to give prominent publicity to applications for new sites. There was a need to talk to communities about siting and design when planning for new sites.

Scott McNally advised Members that it was possible to obtain 100% grants for the building of new site, and which would also raise income through Council tax and rents.

Problems with litter and fly-tipping were not just restricted to Gypsies and Travellers; a minority in any community will behave in an anti-social way and the travelling community would accept fair legal redress.

Members asked if, say, 2 additional sites were built in the County, would there be less unauthorised encampment. They were advised that this would probably be the case, providing enough consultation took place with the Gypsy and Traveller community; however, there would always be a minority who did not wish to stay on authorised sites.

The County Council had a budget of £73,000 for the management of the 6 sites in the County. Some sites were being refurbished and the County were looking at the possibility of providing solar power on refurbished sites. The Gypsy and Traveller lifestyle was environmentally friendly.

Smaller sites e.g. 5 pitches, were often preferable to larger ones. They blended into the surroundings better, and were often easier to manage. There was a need for different types of site depending on the area e.g. sites where people could stay for only one night, several weeks, years etc. The Gypsy and Traveller community could run these types of site, given any necessary assistance to apply for planning permission etc, while the Travellers Liaison Service has a good idea of where in the County it would be useful to have additional provision.

Needs assessments were currently being undertaken, and information was circulated regarding this. (Attached at Appendix B)

The Policy & Regeneration Manager advised Members that work was currently ongoing on the Local Development Framework, which would replace the Local Plan. There would be a need to take into account recommendations from the County Council's Needs Assessment and there could therefore be a need to delay work on this aspect for the time being.

**Note:** Councillor Kinghorn left the Meeting at 6.35pm

The County Council had a draft Strategy on Gypsy and Traveller provision and was currently developing detailed policy statements.

**Note:** Councillor Robinson left the Meeting a 6.40pm

Members were advised that the best type of new site would be an eco-friendly one, using, for example, solar power, blending into the landscape, and having amenity block constructed of local materials.

Richard O'Neill was pleased to have been invited to speak with Members.

The County Council were happy to continue to work with the City following this Scrutiny. It was also suggested that a Portfolio Holder be given responsibility for Gypsies and Travellers as this would demonstrate leadership on the issue.

The Chair felt that someone from the Travellers' Education Service would have useful information, and should be invited to the October scrutiny Meeting. Scott McNally advised he would liaise.

The Chair thanked all Officers and guests for their attendance at the meeting.

#### **4. Any Other Business**

The Panel would be reviewing Council House Repairs at their next meeting. The Chair advised Members that there was an option for using the microphone and recording system at this meeting, however after due consideration, Members agreed that this was unnecessary.

The Meeting terminated at 6.55 pm