

Minutes

Community Service Scrutiny Panel

12th February, 2008

Present: Councillors Howarth (in the Chair) Crooks, Lightley, Mavin, Moderate, D. Smith, Walton and Young.

Also Present: Councillor Thomson – Portfolio Holder for Communities,
Councillors: Carr, Kelly and Thompson,
Neil Laws – Environmental Manager, City of Durham Council
Belinda Snow – Senior Neighbourhood Warden, City of Durham Council
Ruth Scott – Travellers Liaison Service, Durham County Council
Scott McInally – Travellers Liaison Service, Durham County Council

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors: Laverick, Norman, Robinson and Taylor.

2. Minutes

Minutes of the meeting held on 16th January, 2008 were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Gypsy and Traveller Unauthorised Encampments

The Chair asked for guests and Members to introduce themselves and advised that the questions at the end of the minutes.

Questions for Guests at the next meeting:-

- *Have any areas that may be suitable for overnight stop-overs been identified by Planning?*
- *Are these areas within commuting distance to schools and shops?*
- *Who would be first contact?*
- *Would Members require a hierarchy of contacts?*
- *Clarification of the interim protocol.*
- *Would it be possible to have a member of the travelling community to come along to a meeting?*

The Travellers Liaison Services advised the Panel that there had been 136 incidents relating to unauthorised encampments in the County area in the last year. However the number of incidents in City of Durham district were 8, and listed below:-

Sherburn Hill 3 May to 8 May.

SherburnVillage 26 May to 5 June.

Sherburn Village 5 June to 7 June.

Meadowfield 14June to 16 June.

West Rainton 2 July to 13 July

West Rainton 7 July to 23 July

Belmont 19 August to 30 August

Croxdale 27 August to 29 August

Croxdale 27 August to 29 August

Sherburn Village 10 October to 16 October

Lanchester 23 October to unknown

- *Have any areas that may be suitable for overnight stop-overs been identified by Planning?*
- *Are these areas within commuting distance to schools and shops?*

The panel were advised that following the incidents at Sherburn Village a meeting had been convened to try to find a suitable overnight stopping area. An area used by the County Highways had been identified but due to the construction of a new road the initiative had been postponed. Once the new road has been completed there may be a site available in this area.

The Panel were advised of a site on a roundabout on the A68 which could accommodate up to 10 vans and is reasonably well screened. However, it is easier to identify suitable locations in rural areas rather than built up areas. There are particular difficulties in Durham City district because travelling families pulling in to lay bys, the welfare of the travellers is a particular concern in these circumstances. Members questioned why travellers came to the district as they thought it could be for employment but were advised that it is usually to visit family but would use the opportunity to work while they were here, but don't come for that particular reason.

A question was put to the Travellers Liaison Service asking why travellers who live in houses most of the year travel a mile down the road to encamp? Families do this to retain their travelling traditions and culture.

An executive group had been set up, to establish a common purpose across the county. A sub group of the executive group has been established and has representatives from all the districts within the county.

- *Who would be first contact?*
- *Would Members require a hierarchy of contacts?*

The Travellers Liaison Service is the first point of contact, there is no out of hours service but there is an answer machine for people to leave a message, all messages will be picked up the next working day. At the first visit to the encampment by the TLS is to gather information which will allay public fears, not necessarily to have all the answers but happy to manage the situation. Members asked if they could have the correct phone number but were advised that at present it is unavailable. Members asked that the telephone number be publicised when it is available and TLS assured that this would be the case but that the Police are better equipped to deal with anti-social behaviour issues. Members were advised that Councillors should not be tempted to deal with traveller problems themselves and should leave it to the TLS. Response by TLS is usually within 24 hours, but the service covers a wide area with 6 permanent encampments managed so there could be a short delay.

The TLS also has a page on the County Council's website which gives information and advice.

6.15 p.m. Mr McNally left the meeting

Members were informed of an incident at Croxdale where a leaving date had been given and when the date came the travellers had not left, and the frustration of the public at the situation. The TLS advised that it is very rare for a false date to be given and the incident in question the families had nowhere to go and therefore stayed where they were.

Members complained that in some circumstances travellers did not use the facilities provided. TLS informed Members that they should be informed of any problems and would advise families that should they return to this site they would be moved on.

Members asked if all district councils are looking for stopover sites?

To be effective, a countywide approach has to be taken. Most of the district councils are looking for suitable areas. Some sites are only open during the summer months but, should the need arise can be opened as an emergency measure during the winter.

Members had been given a copy of the protocol at the last meeting and were invited to re-examine.

- *Clarification of the interim protocol.*

6.25 p.m. Councillor Thompson left the Meeting

In the past prior to the protocol being established, there was a lot of dithering which led to matters becoming worse. There is a code of conduct for users of sites, which considers noise and tidiness. The protocol is discussed with travellers who are provided with their own copy of the protocol. TLS contacts the police, district council and elected members, however, elected members have sometimes been missed. Members asked if Parish Councillors could be advised of any incidents. (Parish Clerks would be required to advise TLS of Councillors contact details.)

An early welfare report is an advantage, as some travellers could have lots of different needs, but not always easy to obtain the information. Once raw data has been obtained decisions have to be made quickly, the length of stay is a key issue.

Neighbourhood Wardens have experienced problems with mess being left at sites and have received complaints from residents relating to problems with travellers. There are good and bad in all walks of society and the travelling community is no different, but if the TLS is made aware of any incidents problems can be reduced.

6.45 p.m. Councillor Young left the Meeting

Members asked who pays the clean up bill? The County Council picks up most of the tab, this was the case at Byers Garth. It was noted that problems of fly tipping might not be from the travelling community.

The Police representative advised that their hands were tied by legislation and often it was better to let TLS to speak to travellers in the first instance to build up trust.

Members asked if the numbers of burglaries had increased near to areas where sites were located and were advised that this was not the case it was anti-social behaviour which was a bigger cause for concern. Problems can arise from people who call themselves travellers but they are not, often the travelling community does not want these people.

Members were advised that great care should be taken when deciding what is actually written into the protocol and that the protocol should not be in the public domain.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities suggested that he and the Chair of the panel should go out with TLS when they visit a site.

The Chair thanked all the guests and thanked them for their very useful information and their attendance.

4. Any Other Business

The Chair advised Members that the next meeting would take place in the Town Hall and the topic for discussion would be the Review of Council Garages.

Meeting terminated 7:00 p.m.