

22 September 2014

**Gypsy, Roma and Traveller
(GRT) Site Management Service**

**Report of Ian Thompson, Corporate Director, Regeneration
and Economic Development**

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee with background information on the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) Site Management Service prior to an overview by Laura Williams, Housing Gateway and GRT Site Manager.

Background

2. The work programme for the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee focuses on the priority areas identified within the context of the Council Plan ('Altogether Wealthier' priority theme), Cabinet's Notice of Key Decisions, Sustainable Community Strategy, Partnership plans and strategies, performance and budgetary control data and changes in Government legislation.
3. The work programme of the Committee is refreshed on an annual basis to ensure that it focuses on the priority areas identified and members will recall that at the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on the 23 June, 2014 the work programme of the committee for 2014/15 was agreed. One of the areas identified within the work programme was an overview of the GRT Site Management Service and arrangements have therefore been made for Laura Williams, Housing Gateway and GRT Site Manager to attend the meeting on the 22 September to provide an update which will focus on the following:
 - Brief update on the GRT Community in County Durham.
 - The Restructure of the GRT Service.
 - Overview of the 6 Permanent Sites.
 - Key recommendations of improvement for the GRT Service and progress update.

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4. According to the 2011 census 467 people stated they were part of the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller community however it is believed that this figure is not a true representation of the actual population, as many GRTs will not self-identify. The Health Needs Assessment in 2011 estimated that the GRT population in Durham were between 2,200 and 2,940, 0.59% of the County's population.
5. Gypsy, Roma, Travellers and Travellers of Irish Heritage are protected as ethnic groups under the Race Relations Act. The term Traveller is an umbrella for several distinct groups whose lifestyles separate culturally but share some similarities. There are generally thought to be five main groups of Travellers in the UK:
 - Gypsy Travellers and Travellers of Irish Heritage
 - Roma
 - Show People
 - New Travellers
 - Bargees
6. The term 'Traveller' is often used to describe groups of people who have a nomadic lifestyle or who come from a tradition or heritage of nomadism. Durham County Council recognise that Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities are one of the biggest ethnic minority groups in the County.
7. In late September 2013 Children and Adult Service (CAS), prompted by the leaving of the Head of Service of Children's Care undertook a service restructure. The result of which was the realignment of Early Intervention and Involvement and Children's Care. The bringing together of these two service areas created a significant portfolio for the new Head of Children's Services and led to a review of the functions within that portfolio, which included the Gypsy Roma and Traveller Services (GRT). As part of this review, it was suggested that GRT Site management functions be transferred out of Children and Adult Services to Economic Development and Housing.
8. The Council owns and manages 6 fixed permanent sites, housing Gypsies, Roma people and Travellers. The GRT Site Management Service, within Housing Solutions, is responsible for the management of these sites which are located at:
 - Adventure Lane, West Rainton.
 - Ash Green Way, Bishop Auckland.
 - Drum Lane, Birtley.
 - East Howle, Ferryhill.
 - St. Phillips Park, Coundon, Bishop Auckland.
 - Tower Road, Stanley.
9. The Housing Act 2004 required local authorities to assess the accommodation needs of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers, this, along with the Government's aim

“to ensure fair and equal treatment for Gypsy, Roma, Travellers in a way that facilitates the traditional and nomadic way of life for GRT communities while respecting the interests of the settled community” supported the complete refurbishment of all permanent sites within County Durham.

10. St Phillips Park in Coundon Grange and East Howle in Ferryhill were complete in 2009/2011 and the remaining four sites are now subject to major (£9M) refurbishment being led by the Regeneration and Economic Development Team. Work has been funded by the Councils capital programme and through grant funding from the Homes and Communities Agency.
11. Each site hosts a number individual pitches that are rented by Travellers, the site also offers a community block facility. The individual pitches are occupied exclusively by the travellers and their families and comprise of hard standing to enable travellers to park up to 2 trailers and their car/van, there is a brick built amenity block that houses a toilet, bathroom, kitchen/dining area.
12. The GRT Site Management Service supports the role of the site warden to ensure that Gypsy and Travellers live in a settled community. The Site Management Service deal with the allocation of the pitches (in accordance with a specified criteria) and the management of the waiting list together with the day to day operational management of the sites including:
 - Health and Safety.
 - Rent collection and arrears management.
 - Tenancy support.
 - Addressing anti-social behaviour.
 - Repairs and maintenance of amenity blocks and communal areas.
 - General resident queries.
13. Prior to the transfer of the service a review of the management of the sites, completed in January 2013 recommended a series of improvements including allocations policy, rents, improving occupancy, repairs and maintenance, financial management, customer focus and greater clarity on the role of site wardens.
14. The review highlighted a number of issues with the current allocations scheme and the process of allocating pitches. It recommended that the authority should introduce a means of testing applicants rather than relying on the discretion of officer and warden knowledge.
15. The Draft Allocations Policy has been produced and it is proposed that we align the allocations scheme as far as reasonably practicable with our allocations policy for Social Housing. The allocations policy will be available for consultation during the months of September/October with approval of the policy in November 2014.
16. Another key recommendation from this report was that the level of the pitch fees and associated charges must be reviewed to reflect the improved

amenities available post refurbishment and to ensure the management of the sites is self-financing. The pitch fees have now been reviewed and all new tenants are charged the following Pitch Fees:

	Double Pitch Fee	Single Pitch Fee (SPP Only)
Pitch Fee	£44.16	£40.05
Water Charge	£9.96	£9.96
Other Charges	£26.43	£26.43
Total Pitch Fee	£80.55	£76.44

17. Increasing the fee will substantially increase income from the GRT Sites. Total forecast income would rise from the current budgeted income £170,899, based on 60 % occupancy, to £313,494 based on a similar 60% occupancy. However, the sites have been running at a figure closer to 80% occupancy historically which would mean an annual income of £417,992.
18. Under the Mobile Homes Act pitch fees can only be increased with consent from the residents or via an order at Tribunal. Consultation on the rent increase took place with existing tenants (East Howle and St Phillips Park only) and the majority of residents have accepted the new pitch fees however for those that have opposed the increase an application to Court has been made and a tribunal hearing date for the 6th October has been issued.

Next Steps

19. Pitch Fee Increase – Durham County Council will continue to pursue the tribunal application and seek an order for the pitch fee increase.
20. Rent Recovery and Arrears Management System – To enable the service to effectively manage the rent collections and keep arrears to a minimum, the implementation of an effective arrears management system is paramount. A full arrears management system will be in place by November 2014.
21. Allocation Policy Implementation – Consultation with existing waiting list applicants, partners and residents on site is taking place during the month of September 2014. Following this any suggestions for amendments will be considered and final approval under delegated powers will take place in October 2014 with implementation of the policy in November 2014.
22. Other projects are ongoing such as community engagement, supporting the Health Needs of Travellers and a performance review of the service outcomes to maximise income. We will also be reviewing our current budget to identify funding available for future planned maintenance schemes.

Recommendations

23. Members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and comment upon the information provided.
24. That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive a further update on the development of the GRT Site Management Service at a future meeting of the Committee.

Background Paper(s)

Report of Carol Payne - GRT Rent Report 18 December 2013
DCC Health Needs Assessment 2013
Proposal for the Future of GRT Services November 2013

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance – None

Staffing – None

Risk – None

Equality and Diversity– None

Accommodation - None

Crime and Disorder – None

Human Rights – None

Consultation – None

Procurement – None

Disability Discrimination Act –None

Legal Implications – None