

ECONOMY AND ENTERPRISE OSC – SITE VISITS TO GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER SITES IN COUNTY DURHAM

TUESDAY 6 MARCH 2018 AT 9.30 A.M.

Present

Economy and Enterprise OSC

Councillors A Batey (Chair), E Adam, T Henderson, P Howell, P Jopling, J Maitland, R Manchester, A Reed and M Wilson.

Local Councillors

Councillor C Martin

Officers

Stephen Gwilym, Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Transformation and Partnerships

Liz Finnigan, Scrutiny Support Assistant, Transformation and Partnerships

Ashleigh Robson, Tenancy Management Officer, Regeneration and Local Services

Michelle Taylor, Housing Team Leader, Regeneration and Local Services

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Sites in County Durham

At a meeting of the EEOSC held on 29 June 2017, members agreed the Committee's work programme for 2017-18. As part of this process, members were advised of the investment made by the County Council into the refurbishment of permanent Gypsy, Roma and Traveller sites within County Durham and agreed that a site visit be organised to view some of the refurbished sites.

Arrangements were made to visit three of the refurbished sites at East Howle, Ferryhill; Adventure Lane, West Rainton and Drum Lane, Chester-le-Street.

East Howle, Ferryhill

Upon arrival at East Howle, Ferryhill, members met in the on-site community facility and were introduced to Linda Dodds, GRT Site warden for East Howle, Ferryhill and Ash Green Way, Bishop Auckland. Members were accompanied on the site visits by two officers from Housing Solutions, Ashleigh Robson and Michelle Taylor to provide very detailed information on the GRT sites and their management, service provision and the refurbishment programme and answer Members' questions.

Members were advised that the County Council employed 5 GRT site wardens who all live and work on their respective sites.

Ashleigh Robson reported that DCC is noted nationally for being one of the best local authorities to manage permanent travellers' sites, and the service had received national accreditation by De Montfort University Leicester as a model of good practice.

Other local authorities have visited Durham to benchmark their service provision against DCC and the overall view was that Durham is one of the best nationally. Local Authorities who have engaged in such benchmarking have included Northumberland CC, North Yorkshire CC, Stockton on Tees BC and Liverpool City Council.

A presentation was shared with members and it was agreed that this would be circulated to the all committee members.

Members were advised that there are 126 plots across the 6 GRT sites with 25 pitches on the East Howle site. Each pitch contained a brick bungalow type amenity/facility building, with a double plot for caravan and vehicle parking. The plots are fenced off. The facility building contains a kitchen, day room, bathroom, and utilities although it was noted that GRT families tended to sleep in their caravans. The rent is £71.71 per week, and families pay full council tax.

Rent is paid by card or standing order, so the system is cash free. There is a stringent rent policy, and checks are carried up every Monday to ensure there are no problems. No evictions have ever been made from any of the sites.

Ashleigh Robson indicated that around 50% of the GRT community within County Durham actually live in “bricks and mortar” accommodation and that the actual numbers of GRT community members within the County are unknown as there is a reliance on the provision of census data for calculating the numbers. She suggested that it was highly likely that the actual number of GRT community members was higher than the existing census data. The GRT Community was one of the largest ethnic minority groups within County Durham.

Families can travel off site twice a year for 13 weeks, still paying rent for their plot on the site. They have a pitch tenancy agreement which must be adhered to, including number of caravans parked on the pitch and waste disposal.

Members were informed that the Housing Solutions team only managed the permanent GRT sites with the unauthorised sites managed by another team within the REaL directorate.

In terms of GRT Site occupancy levels, members were advised that there is full capacity on all sites and there are lengthy waiting lists with at present 32 families on this waiting list. Members noted that it is very rare that anyone moves off the sites which reflects the positivity within the GRT Communities on the refurbishment programme.

Cllr A Batey commented on the length of waiting lists, and Cllr A Reed on how anyone wanting a GRT pitch were dealt with. They go through the same process as housing applications, and are assessed by officers, who liaise with residents and the site wardens.

Cllr T Henderson reported that in the summer there are problems in Teesdale and that a big temporary site is opened up for them to facilitate GRT communities passing through the area on the way to Appleby Fair, but that they still park on the roadside or grass verges.

Cllr E Adam enquired as to where GRT communities go when they are waiting for a plot? He also asked if the County Council has temporary sites.

In reply, Ashleigh Robson stated that if GRT applicants are identified as being potentially homeless and have been assessed through the Housing solutions process that they would go to the top of the waiting list.

She also stated that in addition to the County Council's six permanent sites there are temporary stop-over sites at various locations within the County which are often used in conjunction with GRT communities travelling to Appleby Fair and other major horse show. She stressed that there were no transient sites within the County. In summer, road side encampment officers signpost families to the temporary stop over sites where there are some facilities, such as water.

Members noted that there is no mains gas on the sites with families using gas bottles. There is electricity, and meters are read and usage billed to individual tenants – again payment by card. There are also water meters on each site.

In viewing the types of caravans on the site, members noted that there were some that could be classed as static caravans. Ashleigh Robson indicated that whilst at first glance they may appear to be static, if they are on wheels they are classed as mobile homes so are allowed on the pitches.

Cllr EA asked about drainage from the caravans and was advised that the families do not tend to use the toilets in the caravans, but use the utility block which is maintained by DCC and Property Help Desk.

Cllr J Maitland asked if rent covered staff costs and this was confirmed.

Cllr P Jopling asked whether there were residents meetings held on the sites. The site warden confirmed that they are held in the community building, along with other sessions, including homework clubs, benefits advice, job searches, health awareness sessions, sports, social sessions, DISC drop-ins, adult learning. There was also a session held on energy efficiency, which helped the residents to save money. There is an office for the wardens and DCC staff to work from and the community buildings are open to residents and also outside bodies.

Cllr Batey asked about Wifi provision within the sites which she said could be a particular concern with the roll out of universal credit. She was advised that there was no Wifi provision within the community building, but some residents have their own by using 'dongles'.

Adventure Lane, West Rainton

Members were introduced to Shaun Freeman, Site Warden for Adventure Lane, West Rainton.

Members were advised that the existing sites were built between 1978 and 1988 using grant aid from the Department of Environment under the Caravan Sites Act 1968 and were inherited by DCC as part of Local Government re-organisation from the former District Councils.

Adventure Lane, West Rainton was re-opened in 2015 following refurbishment and is one of the smaller site to be redeveloped with an increase from 17 to 19 pitches. During the refurbishment process, residents were moved and rehoused until completion. They were not allowed to remain onsite, or travel roadside.

The refurbishment process took 12 months and included things like schools moves during the temporary move, disruption to employment, etc. Officers worked closely with families to support them, and a number of consultation events took place regarding the refurbishment process including getting residents views on site design. Residents could choose floor colour and chose to have toilets in the bathroom, with utility space separate, as this created bigger space for their day living area. All facilities have under floor heating.

A small number of families did not return to the site once redevelopment was complete.

The whole refurbishment process cost just under £9m. However, members were informed that since the completion of the works, rental income from the sites has doubled since the residents returned.

Cllr J Maitland asked where the caravans were kept during the refurbishment period. Members were advised that there were a range of disturbance payments made to residents which included payments for the storage of caravans.

Shaun Freeman, site warden indicated that whilst he has a plot on-site, but also a house elsewhere in the village.

Cllr T Henderson asked was it part of the funding criteria that the site had to be extended, and residents relocated. This was confirmed.

Discussion followed on community spirit across the GRT sites and members were advised that the residents were really happy when they returned to the refurbished sites. They confirmed that it had been a very positive experience.

Cllr A Batey asked whether there was anything identified that they would have liked but did not get? Whilst accepting that residents were pleased with the works undertaken they have subsequently indicated that they would like to have speed humps into the entrance of the site to slow down fast moving vehicles.

It was noted that DCC officers work very closely with wardens and vice versa, to support the residents. When asked about anti-social behaviour, Ashleigh Robson indicated that whilst there had been some perceptions about GRT sites being linked with ASB, all sites are different although it was accepted that the permanent GRT sites have very little. However this could not be said for GRT sites on private land that these are not managed by DCC have. Residents adhere to pitch agreements, management policies, and respect and work with the wardens.

Cllr Adam indicated that he hadn't expected the traveller community to accept this level of control. Ashleigh Robson suggested that the acceptance of such controls was down to the freedom enjoyed within their pitch, the excellent facilities provided within the refurbished sites, the amount of space for vehicles and pets within the pitches, and if an inspection is to be carried out, they are given 14 days' notice. It was also noted that GRT Community acceptance of the pitch agreements and management policies in place had come as a surprise to other Local Authority representatives who had visited as part of benchmarking

Housing Solutions officers also work closely with Neighbourhood Wardens, Police, and partner agencies.

Members also noted that children attend the local school and the Gypsy Roma Traveller Education Team support families. Last year the highest number of GRT children in County Durham sat GCSEs. Rental agreements don't include anything about education, but GRT Education Team engage and work with the families to encourage them to send their children to local schools. Homework clubs are also held in the community buildings.

Drum Lane, Chester-le-Street

This is the oldest GRT site within County Durham and was established in 1978 by Chester-le-Street District Council. It has 19 plots plus the community building and reopened in 2015 after refurbishment.

During the initial discussions about site refurbishment residents said that they didn't want to leave as they are mainly one family. The site warden Jim Lee is one of the family and owns a lot of the land which surrounds the permanent site, including the large bungalow where he lives. He has spent a lot of money on his own land including providing a facility block so when the refurbishment was taking place, residents were allowed to relocate onto his land.

Members were advised that Mr Lee has existing planning permission for 10 permanent caravans/families on his land. Officers confirmed that Mr Lee manages his own site well and is strict with residents about waste disposal and use of bins etc., and if they do not comply whilst on his land, he asks them to leave. It is used by travelling families, or older children who are wanting to leave home and have their own space, but to stay within their community, often staying on Mr Lee's site until a plot becomes free.

The warden's own site does not affect the DCC site. Members were advised that roadside campers are often directed to his land which helps to prevent the problems that can occur with roadside travellers, and provides them with facilities they wouldn't have on the road.

Cllr C Martin introduced himself to Mr Lee as his local councillor, and offered any help/advice if requested. Mr Lee suggested that information on the availability of funding to provide additional toilets on his land to accommodate the 10 families/caravans staying there would be welcomed.

During the discussion, members asked about how the County Council's Elections/Electoral Registration team supported the promotion of democracy and democratic engagement with the GRT community and whether any information around the numbers of GRT Site residents who were on the electoral register was available. It was suggested that information on this issue could be requested from that service.

Housing Solutions officer explained that the support/agreement of residents would be needed in terms of potentially promoting democratic engagement within the GRT Community.

Members were informed that GRT site warden meetings are held once a month.

Discussion also took place on funding for the refurbishments, which was from Homes and Community Agency grants, plus capital from DCC. Cllr P Jopling suggested an accommodation needs assessments of GRT sites should be undertaken due to the length of the waiting list.

Members agreed the sites were really well managed and ideal for traveller families, very clean, and well maintained. However the 32 long waiting list would suggest that there may be a need for expansion.

Conclusion of Meeting

The site visits concluded at 12.10 p.m.