

## **Report to the LDF Cabinet Committee**

**Report reference:** **LDF-002-2008/09**

**Date of meeting:** **15 April 2009**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Portfolio:** **Planning and Economic Development**

**Subject:** **Gypsy and Traveller Options – Consultation.**

**Responsible Officer:** **Andrew Lainton (01992 564481).**

**Democratic Services Officer:** **Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).**

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### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- (1) To note this report on the consultation undertaken on the Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan Document; and**
- (2) To acknowledge that the responses are currently undergoing data entry and analysis and the results will be presented to a future meeting.**

### **Executive Summary:**

The report describes the consultation carried out between 4 November 2008 and 20 February 2009 and indicates the broad scale of the response.

### **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

There are no decisions required at this stage. The report is simply intended to keep Members up to date with progress.

### **Other Options for Action:**

To present a report only when results of the consultation have been fully assessed. This could be several months away, and officers believe this progress report is beneficial in the meantime.

### **Report:**

#### The Consultation

1. Formal public consultation on the options for sites for Gypsies and Travellers ran from 4th November 2008 to 20th February 2009. This followed a number of discussions with stakeholders prior to the preparation of the 'Consultation on Options' document. These included:

(a) the Government Office for the East of England (GO-East) on the timing and content of the plan;

(b) the local Gypsy and Traveller community on their requirements and needs. Myriad Consultants, an external consultancy company with relevant expertise, carried this out on

behalf of the council. The Council was concerned about meaningful contact with this 'hard to reach' group, taking into account the often poor literacy rate and record of enforcement based hostility to the local planning authority;

(c) a 'call for sites' exercise with landowners and developers on potential development sites for a wide range of land uses. Myriad was engaged by the Council to promote this exercise amongst the local Gypsy & Traveller community, using direct contact and a bespoke DVD.

2. The main consultation carried out was via the options document. This set out the main potential options for the strategy and described a 'long list' of potential sites and sought views. The consultation on the options paper ran for three months between early November and late February.

3. The local publicity that the draft options paper received in its progression to Full Council led to a large number of requests from the public for paper copies. There was also a large public attendance at the meetings of the Cabinet and Full Council prior to the issue of the options paper. These meetings were also webcast (available live and viewable later).

4. The Council initially wrote to around 2,900 bodies and interested individuals incorporating a copy of the options document and a consultation pack and inviting comments. This included 74 specific bodies required to be consulted by law. Many more names and addresses (around 1,100) were added to the database during the course of the consultation and all received a copy of the documentation. In addition North Weald Parish Council made its own copies and sent these to all households in that parish. 12 libraries in and around the District were also sent consultation packs.

5. The consultation pack comprised the options document, the questionnaire and accompanying notes to aid its completion, a list of Frequently Asked Questions and a leaflet setting out dates of the exhibitions. All of these were available on the website and the options document and the leaflet went to a second printing because of the demand. Due to a delay in the initial printing a fortnight was added to the consultation period, which was originally intended to end on 20 January 2009. A further two-week extension was later given to allow for the delay in running a training event (see paragraph 10).

6. The Council wrote to all of the occupiers of properties within 300 metres of the possible sites identified in the options document enclosing a leaflet informing them of the consultation packs' availability and the exhibitions. This amounted to approximately 2,800 properties.

7. HM Land Registry searches were undertaken to obtain the details of the owners of possible sites. One-to-one meetings were offered with owners and/or their agents, and these were held where requested.

8. There were requests to make the document available to every household. Because of the very considerable costs involved, and because this would involve sending documents to many people not affected this was rejected by Members. A number of local groups did make copies for local residents. The Council did not object to this action on the strict understanding that no accompanying material was included so as not to slant the response. Multiple copies (within reason) were sent to parish and town councils together with posters to publicise the exhibitions.

9. A briefing session was held for parish and town councils at the regular Local Councils' Liaison Committee prior to commencement of the consultation period. Here it was stressed how joint responses by groups on behalf of individuals were to be encouraged, and a special

group response form capturing the names and addresses of individual supporters of that particular response (as required by the regulations) was circulated. Officers believe that group responses have been particularly successful in this consultation.

10. A training session for local groups on how to successfully engage with the LDF process was held on the 21 January 2009 hosted by POS Enterprises. On the same day a similar event, with particular reference to the Gypsy and Traveller consultation, was held for Members, again run by POS Enterprises.

11. The options document and supporting consultation papers were made available on the Council's website. This was further supported by a considerable volume and variety of background information. Initially this included the exchange of correspondence with GO East which led to the Direction being issued, relevant national planning policy and a number of significant appeal and court decisions. If an individual raised a matter which was considered to be of wider interest this was added to the website, and the Frequently Asked Questions document was updated on a number of occasions. A series of fact sheets for each of the possible sites was published, as were the accessibility scores for each of the sites. The two training sessions that were run for groups and Members were webcast, and are still available to view on the Planning pages of the website. A link to the consultation pages was added to the front page of the website. There was also the opportunity to make comments through the website via an online questionnaire.

12. A series of local exhibitions were organised which are listed below. The last three dates were added at the specific request of the local communities:

- (a) Epping, St Johns Road, Epping - Monday 10 November 2008 from 2pm to 8pm;
- (b) Loughton Methodist Church, 260 High Road, Loughton - Friday 14 November 2008 from 5pm to 8pm;
- (c) The Leisure Centre, Bumbles Green - Monday 17 November 2008 from 5pm to 8pm;
- (d) Waltham Abbey Town Hall, Highbridge Street, Waltham Abbey - Thursday 20 November 2008 from 5pm to 8pm;
- (e) Abridge Village Hall, 39 Ongar Road, Abridge - Friday 21 November 2008 from 7pm to 10pm;
- (f) Thornwood Village Hall, Weald Hall Lane, Thornwood - Monday 24 November 2008 from 5pm to 8pm;
- (g) North Weald Methodist Church, High Road, North Weald - Thursday 27 November 2008 from 5pm to 8pm;
- (h) Theydon Bois Village Hall, Coppice Row, Theydon Bois - Friday 28th November 2008 from 5pm to 8pm;
- (i) Roydon Village Hall, Harlow Road, Roydon - Friday 5 December 2008 from 5pm to 8pm;
- (j) Limes Farm Hall, Limes Avenue, Chigwell - Tuesday 16 December 2008 from 5pm to 8pm; and
- (k) Stapleford Abbots Village Hall, Stapleford Rd, Stapleford Abbots - Tuesday 27 January 2009 from 5pm to 8pm.

13. A special exhibition was also held for members of the local Gypsy and Traveller community, at their request, on neutral territory at the Latton Bush centre in Harlow. This ran from 5 to 8pm.

14. The events were exhibitions rather than public meetings. Their purpose was to publicise the consultation, explain its rationale and help people respond. It was considered that traditional public meetings would not achieve these objectives, as they are often confrontational and charged. They are also likely to exhaust participants and are representative of a traditional 'announce and defend' approach rather than showing openness to participation. It was also considered that the loudest and most outspoken individuals could dominate such events. Local groups were free to host their own public meetings and plainly a considerable number of them did so.

15. Large attendances were achieved at the earlier exhibitions in the larger towns and those communities most effected by the possible sites. For example attendances of over 100 were achieved in Epping and nearer 200 in Waltham Abbey. Good turnouts were also achieved in Thornwood and North Weald. Loughton, which had no possible sites, had a very low turnout (around 16), as did Chigwell (12). A number of lessons can be learnt from this:

(a) a parish by parish approach appeared to have had diminishing returns in terms of effectiveness. A spread of exhibitions in the largest settlements with the greatest possibilities for change is likely to be most effective; and

(b) Adding meetings to the end of a consultation period does not appear to have been effective. The most interest is generated at the start of a consultation.

16. The events were successful in further explaining the process. Large numbers of the consultation pack were distributed, questions answered and names and addresses taken for addition to the consultation database. A number of residents expressed thanks for the manner in which they had been conducted. Inevitably a number of angry and concerned residents did attend, and special measures were taken to keep matters in order. These were successful and at no stage did the police (which supported the events) need to get involved or did crowd numbers or safety become a significant issue, albeit that stewarding was required.

17. Considerable efforts were made to generate local publicity. The Forester was distributed to every household before Christmas 2008 with an article explaining the process. This is a very effective means of reaching the vast majority of households in the District, but it is by no means the only step taken.

18. A media briefing for local newspaper reporters was held and a general media release was published. This coincided with the letters sent out to all the owners of the possible sites. The briefing was attended by the Guardian, Mercury and Gazette newspapers, who all produced extensive coverage as a result. The briefing was held before the first Cabinet meeting on the matter and at least a month before the formal consultation started.

19. Several further media releases were issued to address issues of information or concern raised by residents. The levels of publicity and public awareness led to national newspaper coverage (including the Daily Mail and Express), questions in Parliament and TV interviews by several people including the Leader of Council.

20. Many residents took their own steps to hold meetings, put up notices and distributed leaflets. Local websites and online chat rooms were created. Many of the town and parish councils affected by the consultation were very pro-active in raising awareness.

21. While the Council can never guarantee to reach every individual within its area, the scale of publicity surrounding the Gypsy and Traveller consultation is almost unprecedented. Over a prolonged period, the only issues that may have received comparable or greater publicity in recent years are the introduction of wheelie bins/alternate weekly collection and the East of England Plan, which remained in the headlines for several years.

#### The Scale and Form of Comments Received

22. Around 640 comments were received online (once around 80 duplicate anonymous and racist comments were filtered out). 900 individually completed paper questionnaires were received and around 8,100 residents signed up to group responses. This means a total of about 9,600 returns were made, which is considered to be a high level of response, reflecting good use of the online and group response forms. These responses are being checked (eg to ensure there is no duplication), and very few have so far been returned because (for example) of racist language.

23. There were a number of oral concerns raised by local residents that the form was hard to fill in. Office received very few calls asking about the meaning or interpretation of specific questions, although there were many requests for more specific information or explanation of parts of the text of the options paper. Overall there is little evidence that significant numbers of residents were deterred from commenting.

24. On reflection some questions were technical in nature (e.g. on phasing) and might have been deleted, and a longer summary in newsletter or leaflet form might have been beneficial. The issues being dealt with were inevitably complex and controversial. Locals with a professional planning background aided many residents in their responses or related background and some commissioned professional advice. This helped ensure the level and quality of responses was higher than is normally expected in a consultation of this kind, possibly also reflecting also in part the support and training given to consultees.

#### Summary of Responses

25. To be presented to a future meeting.

#### **Resource Implications:**

Analysis of consultation responses will be carried out by Forward Planning and Development Control staff, from existing budgets.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

All non-technical responses are being checked for the use of racist or other inappropriate wording. Any such replies will be returned with a request that they are reworded in an appropriate fashion, otherwise they will not be included in the analysis.

#### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

The site selection process and some of the technical consultations address these issues.

#### **Consultation Undertaken:**

This is a report on a consultation exercise.

**Background Papers:**

Consultation on Options: Development Plan Provision for Gypsies & Travellers in Epping Forest District (2008).

PPS12: Local Spatial Planning (2008).

**Impact Assessments:**

Separate consultation will be carried out on the Sustainability Appraisal, which incorporates Strategic Environmental Assessment.