

Report to Planning Services Scrutiny Standing Panel



SCRUTINY



Date of meeting: 3rd June 2010

Subject: Update-Epping Forest Gypsy and Traveller Development Document (DPD)

Officer contact for further information: Kassandra Polyzoides, Assistant Director Planning and Economic Development (01992 56 4119)

Committee Secretary: Mark Jenkins (01992 56 4607)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the updated information on the Epping Forest Gypsy and Traveller Development Document be noted.

Report: This Council wrote to CLG on 25th January 2010 requesting a meeting with the Minister then responsible for housing issues (John Healey) to discuss the progress being made in increasing pitch provision, and the need for the continuation of the Direction. A reply was received from the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Sahid Malik) on 31st March. He turned down the request for a meeting and acknowledged the progress being made but advised that “there remains a pressing and urgent need for Gypsy and Traveller pitches in your district.”

He was not prepared to withdraw or amend the Direction and stressed that the Government wished to see the Council dedicating more of its resource to the timely production of the Core Strategy, whilst continuing to work to increase the number of authorised pitches for Gypsies and Travellers. He encouraged the continuation of the “pragmatic” approach taken by the Council (ie the granting of permanent permission, in suitable cases, for existing tolerated or other unauthorised sites, and for some of those with temporary permissions). He also stressed that this was not the Government’s preferred approach to the issue, as it should ideally be a plan-led system identifying appropriate sites.

He indicated that he would be prepared to “revisit the Direction” once the Council has made provision to meet the immediate needs of the travelling community, ie at least 34 net additional pitches by 2011.

There are a few current planning applications which continue the pragmatic approach, and officers have held discussions with an agent who has contacts with one of the sites where a number of long-standing unauthorised sites remain.

Currently the recent permissions (by appeal or Council decision), and the granting of Certificates of Lawful Development, mean that 17 additional pitches have been authorised in the district since 2006 – precisely half-way to the target set by the East of England Plan Single Issue Review. Officers calculate that even if all the outstanding cases of temporary, unauthorised or tolerated sites were to receive permission (and this seems unlikely), the final total would still fall short of the target by 3 or 4 pitches, but a strong case could still be made for the withdrawal of the Direction.

The change of national Government heralds a new approach to the issue, although no particular details have yet emerged. At this stage, it seems likely that regional housebuilding targets (and therefore presumably pitch numbers for the travelling community) will be dropped. Other indications are that the Council’s enforcement powers concerning encampments will be strengthened, but much more needs to be clarified before the Council

will know how to address the issue in the future.

There is obvious concern about the standing of the sites identified in the Issues and Options consultation, and Members may feel that it would be sensible for the Council to repeat its request for a meeting with the new Minister to discuss the best way forward with regard to the Direction, and the need to continue to work on the preparation of the separate DPD.

The Council has also served FOI requests on Brentwood Council and GO-East regarding the service of a similar Direction on Brentwood and its subsequent withdrawal.

Reason for decision: Progress with Gypsy and Traveller DPD

Options considered and rejected:

N/A

Consultation undertaken:

N/A

Resource implications:

Budget provision: N/A for the purposes of this report

Personnel: N/A for the purposes of this report

Land: N/A for the purposes of this report

Community Plan/BVPP reference: N/A

Relevant statutory powers: N/A

Background papers:

Letter to Communities and Local Government from Leader of Epping Forest District Council

Diana Collins, dated 25th January

Response letter from Communities and Local Government to the Leader of Epping Forest District Council Diana Collins dated 31st March 2010

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:

Key Decision reference: (if required)