

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/031/2007-08.

Date of meeting: 16 July 2007.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Planning and Economic Development.

Subject: CLG Consultation - Draft Guidance on the Design of Sites for Gypsies and Travellers

Officer contact for further information: Ian White (01992 – 564066).

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

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To consider the officers' conclusions on the Consultation Document and agree on response comments:

(i) That the next version of the guidance should contain explanatory and illustrative diagrams and photographs, highlighting in particular the land take requirements of individual pitches and sites of 12 to 15 pitches; and

(ii) That the guidance should address in detail the potential conflict of site requirements, notably the number of permanent structures, and the need to protect the openness of the Green Belt.

Context:

1. About a quarter of all gypsy and traveller households in England do not have a permanent home. The Government has established a new framework to increase site provision to meet these needs, with the longer-term intentions of reducing the number of unauthorised sites and improving relations with the settled community. Standards for these sites should equate with those applying to residential areas, and should therefore be:

- (a) Sustainable and easy to manage and maintain;
- (b) Of a similar standard to that expected for social housing in the settled community; and
- (c) Capable of supporting harmonious relations between the travelling and settled communities.

2. A Draft Guidance document on the design of sites for gypsies and travellers has been issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Housing Corporation. Responses need to be made by 22 August to the DCLG. Three types of site are described:

- (a) permanent;
- (b) transit – accommodation will be expected to be between 28 days and 3 months, although the sites themselves are permanent; and
- (c) emergency stopping places – sites in temporary use (less than 28 days) as authorised stopping places.

3. Other reports being presented to this meeting of the Cabinet show that the Council is being expected to make provision for additional sites as a result of an EERA commissioned

study, and that there is a continuing threat of a direction from a Minister in CLG to prepare a separate DPD on site provision for gypsies and travellers. Whatever the eventual outcome of these processes, Members should be aware of the design standards and range of facilities being expected in the Draft Guidance. These requirements will have implications for the areas of land needed to meet the new provision, with consequent implications for negotiations with developers and landowners.

4. As well as addressing current highways, building regulations, fire safety and crime prevention standards, the draft design guidance also tries to make allowance for the cultural needs of gypsies and travellers, and their differing demographic profile as they tend to have larger numbers of children than the settled community. There is recognition also of the increasingly settled lifestyle of some traveller households. Some older sites were designed and developed on the assumption that households would not live on them for long periods – their facilities are increasingly out of keeping with current standards for family living.

Location:

5. The essentials are:

- (i) a safe environment for the residents;
- (ii) giving consideration to the relationship of sites to the adjoining community, eg proximity to services (especially education and health), noise and other potential disturbance;
- (iii) access to water, electricity, drainage and sanitation;
- (iv) not on contaminated land;
- (v) if fairly close to main roads, flyovers or railway lines, consideration must be given to health and safety of children and noise (caravans being more sensitive to the latter than conventional housing); and
- (vi) relatively flat and suitable for purpose, including assessment of risk from flooding.

6. The document describes examples of successful sites within the middle of settled communities. It also acknowledges that many gypsies and travellers express a preference for a rural location on the edge of, or closely related to, a large town consistent with traditional lifestyles and means of employment. Characteristics that would make a location unpopular for the settled community (eg adjacent to light industrial areas) are likely to be the same for the travelling community.

Site Layout, Access and Orientation:

7. Several of the essentials are shared by conventional housing estates (eg ensuring a degree of privacy). Those more specific to caravan sites are:

- (a) Effective site boundary to prevent site expansion from unauthorised encampments;
- (b) Clear gap of 3m within inside of site boundaries, and minimum gap of 6m between caravans and trailers as fire prevention/safety measures;
- (c) Circular or horseshoe layouts of pitches (rather than linear) are apparently preferred;
- (d) Pitches should be designed to allow easy manoeuvrability of trailers of up to 20m in length;
- (e) Traffic calming measures – important because of relatively large numbers of children within the site;

- (f) No caravan should be more than 50m from a road (for emergency vehicles), and internal site roads must have no overhead cable less than 4.5m above the ground;
- (g) Site roads should be constructed to adoptable standards to allow for frequent use by HGVs;
- (h) Individual pitches should have provision for resident parking; and
- (i) Delineation of site so residential areas are separated from areas for commercial or work use (this applies mainly to sites for travelling showpeople). Such delineation would also apply to the inclusion of space for keeping animals.

8. Officers are concerned that the draft guidance contains no diagrams, drawings or photographs. The section on layout could usefully include illustrative sketches showing how some of the criteria can be met. This would be particularly useful for pitch layouts because circular or horseshoe arrangements are likely to require greater areas of land than linear schemes. There are implications here for identifying suitable sites as part of the overall land release from the Green Belt to meet EEP housing targets which will include provision for gypsies and travellers.

Services and Facilities:

9. Most of the requirements (eg for water, electricity, drainage, sewerage etc) are broadly similar to conventional housing. The document proposes that provision should be made for each pitch for domestic waste disposal, including access for refuse vehicles. Facilities with more specific reference to gypsy and traveller sites include:

- (a) Lighting – this must be adequate to enable safe access and movement through the site at night for pedestrians and vehicles. Officers are concerned about the potential implications of this, given the likely rural location of future sites. Any proposals would therefore have to satisfy policy RP5A of the Local Plan Alterations;
- (b) Play space – the document recommends the inclusion of a recreation area for children of all ages where suitable provision is not available within walking distance on a safe route or by public transport. The document is not clear about whether such provision should be considered for all sites falling into the above category, or just for the “larger” ones, however that is defined. Officers are concerned about the land-take and cost (capital and maintenance) implications of this proposal;
- (c) Communal facilities – where a site is isolated from local facilities and/or is relatively large (again not defined), a communal building is recommended. This should include a community room, toilets (male and female) and a kitchenette, and regard must be had to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. This suggestion will obviously conflict with the need to protect the openness of the Green Belt.

Individual Pitches:

10. The document recommends that each pitch should be capable of accommodating a large trailer, a touring caravan, drying space for clothes, a lockable shed, parking space for two vehicles and an “amenity unit”. The latter must include hot and cold water supply, separate toilet, bath/shower room, a kitchen and dining area. The document also recommends the inclusion of a day/living room in each amenity unit, which could be combined with the kitchen to provide a kitchen/dining/lounge area. The document describes the Severalls Lane site in Colchester where each of the 12 pitches will have a semi-detached single storey amenity building, which will be larger than those on the majority of existing sites. They will include a kitchen with separate lounge/dining area, a bathroom and storage space. A variety of building materials will be used to avoid an “institutional” look – brick, half-brick/half-weatherboarding, tile and slate roofs. This is another example where the document would benefit significantly from diagrams and photographs.

11. Officers are extremely concerned about the implications of these proposals for the openness of the Green Belt. They believe that the settled community will find the requirement for separate amenity blocks for each pitch very hard to accept, given the restrictions that apply to domestic extensions in the Green Belt. The document seems to have been written without consideration of this issue. If these design guidelines are adopted in an essentially unaltered form, officers would conclude that the only acceptable way to make any future provision for gypsy sites in this district will be as parts of those sites to be released from the Green Belt for EEP purposes.

12. The document is particularly weak on landscaping (including responsibility for implementation, management and maintenance), which officers believe to be a crucial issue if sites are to be designed to complement or at least not have an adverse effect on their rural setting. The suggestion is made that permanent sites should provide for 6 to 12 pitches, and transit sites for up to 15. The document needs to include illustrative diagrams of layouts of sites of 12 to 15 pitches, showing how all the temporary and permanent buildings can be accommodated, and how the site can be landscaped to minimise visual impact. Sketches or photographs of acceptable designs for amenity blocks would also be beneficial. Such diagrams will also give an indication of the total area of land needed to meet all the requirements, eg internal roads. This is critical for future negotiations with landowners and developers.

Transit Sites and Emergency Stopping Places:

13. The guidance for permanent sites largely also applies to transit sites except that the requirement for proximity to community facilities is only essential regarding the need for access to schools. For pitches, it is essential that each has a toilet, wash basin and shower. There is no requirement to provide amenity buildings on a transit site, but the document recommends the provision of a communal laundry and drying space where sites have a resident manager.

14. The document lists the essential requirements for emergency stopping places, most of which relate to basic standards for safe highway access, fire prevention, barriers to discourage unauthorised expansion, and access for emergency vehicles. Such sites would only be used intermittently, eg at times of fairs or other cultural celebrations.

Conclusions:

15. The document is timely, given the pressure the Government is exerting to increase the provision of gypsy and traveller sites. It is a useful first step, bringing together the wide range of considerations needed for the development of sites.

16. It badly needs illustrative layouts, diagrams and photographs. Of key importance is an indication of the total land take of individual pitches, and of sites of 12 to 15 pitches.

17. It would be helpful if the document could address the issue of conflict with Green Belt policy. Gypsy and traveller sites are inappropriate uses in these areas. If some sites are to be located there as exceptions to policy, the document needs to advise on how the normal restrictions against inappropriate permanent buildings can be satisfied.

Statement in Support of Recommended Action:

18. The document raises issues of potential concern in the district – notably the provision of permanent buildings (trailers, amenity blocks and community buildings) in the Green Belt. The document has to be reported to this Cabinet to meet the consultation deadline of 22 August.

Other Options for Action:

19. The consultation could have been reported via the Council bulletin, but given the general sensitivity of the topic, it is considered more appropriate to report to Cabinet.

Consultation Undertaken:

20. None.

Resource Implications:

Budget Provision: Nil.

Personnel: From existing resources.

Land: Nil.

Council Plan 2006-10/BVPP Reference: GU1, GU4, HN1, HN2, HN3, IP4.

Relevant Statutory Powers: ODPM Circular 01/2006 – Planning for Gypsy and Traveller Caravan Sites.

Background Papers: CLG Consultation Document – Draft guidance on the design of sites for Gypsies & Travellers (May 2007).

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: Well designed and located caravan sites will help to address the human rights of gypsies and travellers. Normal planning and environmental health functions deal with environmental issues. There are no crime and disorder implications.

Key Decision Reference (if required): Planning and Economic Development Item 1.