

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 24 July 2007

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mrs A Grigg

Item: 10(a)

1. ADDITIONAL PITCH PROVISION FOR GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS

Recommending:

That, for the purposes of discussions with potential developers, the draft Core Strategy Policy on Gypsy and Traveller Provision, attached as an appendix to this report, be approved in order that provision be delivered along with any major developments resulting from the East of England Plan.

Government Advice

- 1.1 The Government has concluded that there has been a failure to deliver adequate sites for gypsies and travellers in many areas of England. Provision of an adequate number of suitable sites, including transit sites, in locations that meet the current working patterns of gypsies and travellers is now very high on the national political agenda.
- 1.2 The Housing Act 2004 and ODPM Circular 1/2006 (Planning for Gypsy and Traveller Caravan Sites) provide for the future provision for gypsies and travellers to be brought into the mainstream. The Council as local housing authority will therefore have to include gypsies and travellers in its accommodation assessments, and indicate how their needs will be met as part of the Housing Strategy.
- 1.3 The circular outlines how the new Planning System will address future provision. Gypsy and traveller accommodation assessments will inform the Regional Spatial Strategy - The East of England Plan. The Regional Spatial Strategy will then allocate pitch numbers to each local planning authority area. This identified need will be dealt with at district council level by site allocations in a development plan document as part of the Local Development Framework. Housing numbers for each district in the Regional Spatial Strategy will therefore include provision for gypsies and travellers. The Circular stresses that it will no longer be sufficient for local authorities to rely on criteria-based policies alone - site allocations in development plan documents will be expected.
- 1.4 The Circular is rather ambiguous about development in the Green Belt. It states that development of sites on Green Belt land can usually be avoided if the local planning authority allocates sufficient sites elsewhere in its area to meet identified need. However, in this District, the Green Belt boundaries are drawn very tightly around settlements, and pressure for use or re-use of urban sites is such that the potential for use for gypsies and travellers is very limited. New land allocations to meet the housing requirement of the East of England Plan will mainly be taken out of the Green Belt and these should include provision for gypsies and travellers.

- 1.5 The Circular further advises that where there is clear and immediate need, for instance evidenced through the presence of significant numbers of unauthorised encampments or developments, local planning authorities should bring forward development plan documents containing site allocations in advance of regional consideration of pitch numbers, and completion of the new gypsy and traveller accommodation assessments. There is apparently no attempt to differentiate between need and demand.
- 1.6 Members have been briefed at various times on the implications of Circular 1/06 and this has also been considered in the context of the proposed Single Issue Review of the East of England Plan. The Travellers Task and Finish Panel was briefed on this issue and published its final report in July 2006, with the longer-term accommodation issues being passed to the Environmental and Planning Services Standing Committee. This indicates the Council's continuing awareness of the issue and the acceptance that there are significant on-going problems which require attention.

Need

- 1.7 The Essex Planning Officers' Association commissioned the University of Salford to prepare a report on gypsy accommodation needs in Essex. The report predicted requirements up to 2016 on a county level, rather than district-level basis and concluded that an extra 59 pitches (provision for 118 caravans) would be needed in the county, although immediate provision for 440 caravans on unauthorised sites was also recommended.
- 1.8 Earlier this year the East of England Regional Assembly commissioned a review of existing gypsy and traveller accommodation assessments in the East of England to prepare for a Single Issue Review of the East of England Plan which will identify and plan for the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers in the region and break down these figures into county and district/borough totals. The first stage of this review has been published with a consultation period lasting until 31 July 2007.
- 1.9 The review document only calculates additional demand up to 2011 and presents two options for provision, one being broadly based on areas of current greatest demand, and the second being on a more even distribution. The results contrast sharply with those identified in the report commissioned by the Essex Planning Officers' Association. The Essex requirements, only up to 2011, are for 438 additional pitches under the first option, and 405 under the second. For both options, the additional provision required in this District would be 52 pitches (close to the figure for the whole of Essex up to 2016 in the report commissioned by the Essex Planning Officers' Association). A 3% annual growth rate is also suggested for estimating provision needs beyond 2011.
- 1.10 The Essex Planning Officers' Association have commissioned independent consultants to determine why the two studies have come up with such different results and to examine their different methodologies in the light of Circular 1/06. The consultants will be required to report in time for the Essex authorities to include their findings in the responses to the East of England Regional Assembly consultation.

Local Development Scheme

- 1.11 A draft revised local development scheme was submitted by the Council to Go-East in October 2006. This was intended to be an interim measure, because a final version of the scheme would need to base its programme on the final adoption of the East of England Plan. Go-East responded to the Council's draft scheme stating that

the relevant Minister considered that the Council was not attaching sufficient urgency to addressing unmet gypsy and traveller accommodation needs and that the scheme should therefore include a Council intention to prepare, as matter of urgency, a development plan document dealing specifically with this issue.

1.12 Following a response to that letter a meeting was held between Planning Officers and Go-East at which discussions focused on:

(a) the Council's view that a direction to produce a separate Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan document was both unwarranted and a poor use of limited resources;

(b) the delay by the Council in considering a report aimed at guiding discussions;

(c) the fact that the total of unauthorised caravans in this District was largely made up from two sites, one of which was due to be considered at a public inquiry in June (now October) and that if that inquiry found in favour of the appellants, the number of unauthorised caravans in the District would be halved, thereby significantly reducing the need for a separate development plan document;

(d) the suggestion by the Council that the issue of gypsy and traveller provision should be addressed through a Core Strategy Policy with site/pitch numbers being allocated through a Land Allocations Development Plan Document which would follow the Single Issue Review of the East of England Plan;

(e) concern about the suggestion that the Minister was minded to direct the Council to amend the Local Development Scheme;

(f) analysis of recent caravan counts for the District.

1.13 Draft minutes of the meeting taken by Go-East were sent to the Council and there followed correspondence between the parties on those minutes. This correspondence has so far failed to resolve differences between the Council and Go-East and we have been advised that the Minister will make a final decision after consideration of this meeting's recommendation.

Core Strategy Approach

1.14 We are of the clear view that the proposed Core Strategy approach is the best one to meet the medium/long-term needs for gypsy and traveller provision, and to do so sooner than a Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan document. We believe this approach is more effective and resource efficient. Adopting the draft Core Strategy Policy attached as an Appendix to this report will assist this approach.

1.15 We recommend as set out at the commencement of this report.