



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

19 May 2023

FAO: Cabinet Members, Be First and Barking and Dagenham Council

RE: PROVISION OF GYPSY AND TRAVELLER SITES IN BARKING AND DAGENHAM

Following our meeting on Wednesday 22 February where we discussed a proposal to extend the existing Gypsy and Traveller site at Eastbrookend Country Park to deliver 12 pitches of the 25 required by the Local Plan. Proceeding with this site would subsequently mean a declassification of green belt land for the purpose of residential development, which raised concerns with me as the Member of Parliament for Dagenham and Rainham. Not least because at the last two elections (2017 and 2019) I have stood on a clear platform to prevent this from happening in the neighbouring borough, also within my constituency, of Havering.

In the meeting it was broadly accepted that it should not be beyond the wit of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and Be First to find a suitable brownfield site, given the sheer volume of sites earmarked for development opportunity across the south of the borough. So, given this, it was incredibly disappointing to not hear anything further, only finding out that the Eastbrookend site was recommended for approval at the upcoming Cabinet Meeting by a chance follow up from Councillor Andrew Achilleos.

Having now reviewed the Cabinet Report, whilst I note that *“significant work has been undertaken since the Preliminary Hearing to identify and assess 60 other alternative sites”*, I find it unusual that the location at Eastbrookend Country Park does not feature in Appendix A – the site deliverability assessment. Whilst it outlines the 18 sites identified through the “Call for Sites” process it should, for decision makers, include comparable data for the site being recommended for approval.

If we are to reference the 01.10.21 Gypsy and Traveller Site Selection Paper produced by Be First we can clearly see that despite being pushed as the preferred site, Eastbrookend Country Park is actually the least appropriate suggested site by Be First’s own metrics. See below.

Site Name	Green Belt	Local Nature Reserve	Site of Importance	BAP Priority Habitat	Flood Risk	Conservation Area	Listed Building	Loss of Open Space	European Site	Site of Special
Collier Row Road	Red	Green	Red	Yellow	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green
Crabtree Avenue	Green	Green	Red	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Keir Hardie Way	Green	Green	Red	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Roosevelt Way	Yellow	Green	Red	Red	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Choats Road	Green	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Eastbrookend Country Park	Red	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Green	Red	Red	Green	Green



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The cost implications for both sites as outlined in the Cabinet Report do not appear complete which further acts to undermine the decision. There is a clear indication that development at Eastbrookend Country Park would cost c.£3 million. However, there does not seem to be a delivery cost attached to the 47 Thames Road site, stating that it would cost c.£0.5 million to clear it ready for development only. Further to this it seems that the decision weights against the use of this site because the *“unit might command a rent of £185k per annum.”* (P.12 - 3.7)

Furthermore pages 66-68 of the Cabinet Report Appendix A outlines the feasibility/deliverability of a Gypsy and Traveller site at 47 Thames Road. This item produces the only potentially deliverable conclusion stating the following:

“The site could be suitable for a traveller site following agreement from Cabinet that the site can be released from its existing use and noting the financial implications that the loss of income would have on Council finances and the substantial change to its original proposal as a mixed-use scheme.”

Within the report itself on P.11 3.7 and in a letter dated 04 May 2023 from the Director of Community Participation and Prevention regarding the future of the 47 Thames Road site, currently occupied by Participatory City, it was stated that:

“The site is currently let to a community group, but they will vacate the site in December 2023.”
Cabinet Report P.11 3.7

“Participatory City has taken the difficult decision to announce the closure of Every One Every Day for residents by December 2023. Resident activity will continue to take place in the Every One Every Day Warehouse (47 Thames Road) until the end of 2023.” 04 May 2023 Director of Community Participation and Prevention, Community Solutions LBBD.

Taking this information into consideration it is clear that the site at 47 Thames Road has been released from its existing use and therefore the conclusion in the ‘London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Gypsy and Traveller Site Deliverability Assessment’ should be changed from ‘yellow’ to ‘green’ making it the only viable option. In doing so and proceeding with 47 Thames Road, the scheme would deliver an additional unit (totalling 13) to that of the presently preferred site at Eastbrookend Country Park (totalling 12).

I want to take this opportunity in the representation to make it absolutely clear that the local authority has a duty to provide sites for communities with protected status such as the Gypsy and Traveller Community, which I fully support as the Member of Parliament. I also support the outlined refurbishment and improvement of living conditions on the current site, located adjacent to the proposed site which has been the focus of this letter. Over the years I have addressed many casework issues stemming from disrepair at this location, so whichever site is eventually chosen, the regeneration of the existing provision at Eastbrookend Country Park must feature in the plans.

This week my office has been in communications with Eastminster School of Riding who reached out expressing their opposition to this proposal on a number of different grounds, primarily raising issues with anti-social behaviour concerns which they allege have been ongoing for some years, and

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stem from the existing site. They also explain that:

"If they [Be First/LBBD] are allowed to move this area out of green belt, what will stop them taking more of the country park for development? The Ranger Service have been doing a fantastic job with limited staff and little council funding, they have found grants to improve the site. This development will be counterproductive to everything they have done."

As Be First and the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham know Eastbrookend Country Park and The Chase are both Green Belt and protected Local Nature Reserves, including Special Sites of Scientific Interest. The Chase is also designated as a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation. What is most concerning is that in the original bid for funding to facilitate this development section 5.7 of the bid explains that whilst the land currently falls within Green Belt, the Council and Be First are actively seeking to amend the Green Belt boundaries through the Local Plan process – seeking to redesignate/declassify the land.

My concern is that declassifying this site from the Green Belt could set a precedent and lead to a domino effect in the immediate area, primarily a re-application from the Farmhouse Tavern for a permanent structure on the Green Belt land on the other side of the Eastbrookend Discovery Centre. As outlined in the beginning of this representation I stood on a platform to protect the Green Belt in 2017 and 2019 so this is an important issue, especially given current land value and development prospects in the area – there is no shortage of scope or investment to develop in East London. This could open the door to undesirable future applications including land declassification.

There are also existing concerns around fly-tipping from the Eastminster School of Riding that they explain will be exacerbated if this proposal is approved: *"We already have fly tipping from the site, this is on the road that accesses the cemetery, not nice when attending a funeral. Logically if you increase the number on the site, it would increase the volume of fly tipping."*

There are a number of anti-social behaviour elements which have been raised not only by the School of Riding, but also by residents who frequently attend the Eastbrookend Tea Room and Council-led family events at the Eastbrookend Discovery Centre. These reports range from car-theft to intimidation, and also have a knock-on effect to those visiting Eastbrook Cemetery. If this piece of Green Belt land was lost to development the site border would be very close to the well visited cemetery, and would undoubtedly cause disturbance to family and friends looking to visit and pay respects to their loved ones.

I think as I draw this representation to a close it is important to raise the success of the Eastbrookend Tea Room and the amazing work of the Park Rangers, who have put Eastbrookend Country Park on the map and have made it a destination for our residents and visitors to the area. This has been recognised to such an extent that the Centre was marked on the 150-year anniversary of the District Line poster which is advertised across the London Underground network. It is fair to say that the country park has come a long way in a very short space of time, and I know families in the area would be very disappointed if this hard work and investment was undermined by a development that could be sited somewhere more suitable.

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The Park Ranger team have gone from strength to strength since 2020 when plans to make Barking and Dagenham the 'green capital of the capital' were publicly stated, and working in line with the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, Biodiversity Action Plan, Public Health and as part of a greener Inclusive Growth plan, they have increased resident engagement levels and have achieved green flag status for accessibility and cleanliness at Eastbrookend Country Park.

I share concerns that have already been raised by Councillors and residents that despite the best efforts of Barking and Dagenham as an outward looking and forward-thinking local authority, public prejudice could impact footfall and the future sustainability of the Eastbrookend Discovery Centre, and all associated business models, and activities should this expansion go ahead in this location – unravelling many of the achievements of the past three years.

I therefore ask the Cabinet Members and Officers of both Be First and Barking and Dagenham Council to rethink this proposal, and to continue seeking alternative sites alongside 47 Thames Road to meet the required Gypsy and Traveller pitch provision, and to ensure that the integrity of our green belt is protected for future generations.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jon Cruddas'.

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