

THE EXECUTIVE

15TH APRIL 2003

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF HOUSING & HEALTH

TRAVELLER SITE PROVISION	FOR DECISION	
<i>This report seeks a decision on the future of the Council's Authorised Gypsy Site that could have significant resource implications.</i>		
<u>Summary</u>		
<p>The future of the Council run Travellers site at Eastbrookend, Dagenham needs to be considered following a Best Value Review and changes in policy affecting management of unauthorised traveller encampments. This report updates Members on issues arising and proposes refurbishment of the site in order to comply with legal requirements, best practice and government policy.</p>		
<u>Recommendation</u>		
<p>The Executive is asked to:</p>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Consider the Options available for the site and support Option 6 to refurbish to make safe and provide temporary and permanent pitches2. Accept Government grant recently approved to refurbish the Eastbrookend Gypsy Site to cover 75% of the projected total capital costs of £451,500 with the Council funding 25% (£112,875).3. Agree to fund £112,875 from the capital programme for 2003/4. The capital programme for 2004/5 has set aside £100,000 for this purpose; however, grant rules will require that payment be made within 2003/4. This sum plus an additional £12,875 will need to be included in the programme for 2003/4.4. Receive a further report on proposals for the long-term management to include running costs for the site.		
<u>Reasons</u>		
<p>Failure to approve refurbishment will mean that the Council will not provide for housing need of a vulnerable ethnic group and will result in problems in managing traveller encampments in the Borough.</p>		
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1. Background

- 1.1 The Council's Gypsy Site at Eastbrookend was developed under legislation that enabled a quicker response to unauthorised traveller encampments if a Council provided a site for travellers on a temporary basis. This meant that unauthorised encampments in the Borough could be dealt with administratively quicker than if no site was provided.
- 1.2 The emphasis over the last decade has changed and, although the requirement was lifted in 1994, Government policy has supported the retention of existing sites and has promoted the idea that travellers provide their own sites. Responsibilities for authorities under other legislation such as the Children's Act and other human right laws now also mean that all aspects of travellers lives need to be taken into account when decisions are made about their needs.
- 1.3 In July 2002 the Government announced an intention to enhance Police powers to deal with unauthorised encampments, directly linked to availability of Local Authority provision for stopping places. Following discussions with the Metropolitan Police, it is clear that refurbishment that allows for stopping places at the site will assist the Councils overall management of traveller issues in the Borough.
- 1.4 In line with this progressive view on catering for travellers needs, the Government is offering a grant to Councils to refurbish or provide sites that include temporary stopping sites.
- 1.5 The site provides spaces for up to sixteen caravan pitches along with some basic amenities. The nine current occupants appear to have settled on the site due to a variety of reasons including changes in family circumstances, children's needs, infirmity or changes in lifestyle. The site is unsafe and does not offer minimum standards for accommodation of this kind.

2. Housing Need

- 2.1 The legal definition of a Gypsy reflects nomadic lifestyle rather than ethnicity and therefore includes those that travel or Travellers. However, Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are recognised as having a distinct ethnic origin.
- 2.2 Nationally, there is an under provision of gypsy site pitches and most sites tend to have a very low turnover and are thus settled communities. Pitch provision overall is increasing but the availability of short stay sites is reducing.
- 2.3 This situation is echoed at Eastbrookend where the existing licensees do not travel extensively although they remain on an annual license. Most are on low incomes and this site meets an important social housing need.
- 2.4 The Best Value Review in 2001 concluded that the accommodation needs of travellers for short and long stay accommodation is poorly serviced within the borough as standards at the site are unsatisfactory and a specialist provider of housing management should manage it.

- 2.5 We have a small waiting list for vacant pitches, but have suspended the list pending the outcomes of this report. To date we have around 50% occupancy to allow for future improvements.
- 2.6 Space standards are poor. As family units develop the site cannot easily and safely accommodate their housing needs. In addition, conditions at the site do not offer the opportunity to a decent home standard. Attempts to reduce density and enforce compliance with licence agreements have met with mixed success. Unauthorised Travellers occupying vacant pitches have exacerbated these problems and are inflating management costs.
- 2.7 The site is built on contaminated land which should present no immediate risk to health but which inflates refurbishment costs.
- 2.8 Currently the estimate for 2002/3 requires income of £20,000 to balance the budget for the site. Management costs and a reduction in occupancy mean that the site is expected to over spend by up to £15,000. These costs have been met from within Health and Consumer Services budgets for 2002/3.

3. Option Appraisal

- 3.1 An Option Appraisal and a risk assessment of the alternatives for the future provision of this site have been carried out. Here is a summary of the Options considered:
- 3.2 **Option 1.** No Change – this will avoid any capital costs but running costs will be high and standards will be low. Conditions at the site are prejudicial to the health, safety and welfare of the occupiers
- 3.3 **Option 2.** Sell Land to Travellers – this is unlikely to present a workable solution.
- 3.4 **Option 3.** Closure – this will remove the problems of this site but an important housing need for a vulnerable group will not be met and potential problems due to illegal traveller encampments will not be manageable. It is also highly likely that it will result in legal challenge.
- 3.5 **Option 4.** Convert to short stay only use – this option will create significant management and policing issues. It is unpopular with residents and neighbours. The long stay housing need for a vulnerable group will not be met and its impact on unauthorised encampment is uncertain. Government grant cannot be guaranteed and management costs would be approximately £30,000. Capital costs would be incurred but would be approximately £50,000.
- 3.6 **Option 5.** Convert the site to a “Mobile Home Site” – this option would mean that the site would no longer be a caravan site under the CSA. Government funding would not be available but it may open up partnership opportunities to provide long stay affordable accommodation. It is unattractive to pitch holders that retain a nomadic lifestyle and provides no short stay option.

- 3.7 Option 6. Upgrade and convert to combined long stay and short stay use – this option would best meet the housing need of Travellers and would support the management of unauthorised sites. The provision of government grant of 75% of the costs are made on the condition that the site is maintained for ten years.
- 3.8 Detail management costs and options will be reported at a later date. Because rents cannot be increased until the site has been improved and closure for refurbishment will reduce income, we will be unable to balance the management and running costs until 2004/5. However, £40,000 of project management costs for 2003/4 were included in the approved grant bid.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The past two decades have seen varying policies on traveller issues and this Council has maintained a humane and progressive stance by continuing to provide a site, developing robust policies in relation to traveller issues and acting decisively when local communities have encountered genuine problems associated with unauthorised encampments.
- 4.2 The Option presenting the fewest risks, Option 6 – refurbishment of the site for both long term and stopping place sites, offers the opportunity to provide a site in line with current travellers needs and also assists the Council and Police in managing unauthorised encampments.
- 4.3 Depending upon the outcome of this report detailed proposals for management of the site will be brought at a later date.

Background Reports

- Public Health Best Value Review 2001.
- The Provision and Condition of LA Gypsy/Traveller Sites in England – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, October 2002.