

Gypsy and Traveller sites in and around Leicester

Introduction

The only existing provision for an authorised Gypsy and Traveller 'permanent' site in the City is at Meynells Gorse. There is a very long waiting list for this site. There are no authorised 'transit' sites in or immediately adjacent the City. Nor are there permitted 'stopping places'.

I am intensely aware of the problems, the complaints and the expense caused by unauthorised encampments - especially those that have occurred in the Beaumont Leys and Abbey wards - over a number of decades. (In the City, over 115 such encampments in the period from Jan 2009 to Sept 2012).

Although there may be appropriate land opportunities outside of the city boundary that are less built up and have access to more open land for accommodating livestock, it is unlikely in the short term that the County Council and neighbouring districts will provide adequate alternatives to at least some additional sites in the City.

In coming to my decisions I have been mindful of the necessity to do so taking full account of all relevant considerations and no account of irrelevant matters.

In their report to me following the public consultation Council Officers have set out the background to these issues and the planning policies that I must consider. They have also described the different types of sites and the availability of funding. I have very carefully considered the summary and analysis of consultation; considered the letters and petitions and reviewed the alternative sites suggested. I have particularly considered the Equality Impact Assessment and arguments put to me about the environmental impact – most particularly in relation to the Council's adopted policies regarding the 'green wedge'.

During this process, amongst other discussions, I have attended a public meeting to hear concerns and answer questions; have met with representatives of residents within the City boundary and from Birstall and have met with local MPs Liz Kendall and Stephen Dorrell. I have also met with some travellers. I have sought to give equal weight to representations regardless of whether they happen to come from inside or outside of the city's boundary.

I have been particularly grateful for the thorough work undertaken by the City Council's Economic Development, Culture and Tourism Scrutiny Commission chaired by Councillor Sue Waddington. Their evidence sessions, deliberations and report have been particularly useful in reviewing the adequacy of the process of site assessment and consultation and in shaping my views on the suitability of particular sites and on related issues.

I am aware that any proposals I now approve will need to be subject to full consideration by the City Council's Planning Committee and am also aware that the Committee may take a different view from mine about the planning and environmental issues.

I have asked officers to ensure that all the relevant background and advice papers on this matter have been made available to the public. I am assured that this has been done.

Conclusions and Decisions

I am convinced that –

- 1 There is overwhelming evidence that additional sites are needed now within the city boundary to provide both 'permanent' and 'transit' pitches and that there is also a case for identifying one or more 'temporary stopping places' for very short term peaks of demand.
- 2 There is a compelling case for new 'permanent' sites to be comparatively small – ten or less pitches – minimising their impact on the neighbourhood; reducing the levels of management input required and meeting the stated preferences of travellers themselves.
- 3 Although the most pressing immediate need is for sites in the North West of the City, the Council should also look again at finding further smaller sites elsewhere in the City and should redouble its efforts to persuade surrounding districts and the County Council to identify and make available appropriate sites.
- 4 In seeking to identify potential 'temporary stopping places' the Council should look at established good practice elsewhere and re-examine sites that might be suitable for short term use (perhaps up to 14 or 28 days) in particular seasons. This could, for example, include those susceptible to occasional flooding that might have been ruled out as permanent or transit sites.

With regard to particular sites, I am in broad agreement with the Scrutiny Commission and do not accept all of the recommendations of council officers -

- 5 For the reasons given by the Scrutiny Commission and contrary to the recommendation from officers, I do not intend to proceed with a proposed site on Beaumont Way and would intend that the Council gives a firm commitment not to use that site for these purposes.

- 6 I agree with the Scrutiny Commission, that the site at Greengate Lane is acceptable only as a comparatively small development with a maximum of 6 'permanent' pitches. I intend that the council should give a firm commitment to develop and manage the site in such a way that disturbance is minimised and that it cannot be extended.
- 7 I also agree with the Scrutiny Commission that the Redhill Way site is suitable for development of a site of 10 'permanent' pitches. Here too I intend that the council should give a firm commitment to develop and manage the site in such a way that disturbance is minimised and that it cannot be extended.

I am aware that, taken together, these sites, if approved by the Planning Committee, would still fall a significant way short of the immediate and anticipated needs and would be most unlikely, by themselves, to relieve all of the issues of unauthorised encampments. However I also recognise that any further proposed sites will also need to be subject to public consultation.

I therefore intend to instruct officers that over the next 3 months they should -

- 8 Hold further discussions with the County Council and neighbouring district councils encouraging them to identify and bring forward appropriate sites for gypsy and traveller encampments in the Leicester area.
- 9 Consider how sites in other ownerships across the whole city that might be capable of providing comparatively small (six to ten pitches) developments can be brought forward and report to me on appropriate processes.
- 10 Explore and, if appropriate, bring forward proposals for the Hoods Close and Ratby Lane areas considered by the Scrutiny Commission, about which, I would then commission further consultation before deciding whether to progress them.
- 11 Invite discussions with those in the gypsy and traveller communities who might themselves wish to identify, develop and manage sites – as has been done successfully in some other parts of the country.

I note officer advice on this matter but will also instruct them to -

- 12 Seek to identify a site or sites where stopping can be tolerated while new sites are being developed.

There are two additional issues that were raised by the Economic Development Scrutiny Commission that I intend to ask their colleagues on the Adults and Housing Scrutiny Commission to consider and make recommendations –

13 The management and maintenance of the existing site at Meynells Gorse – about which some concerns and questions have been raised.

14 The structure, priorities and effectiveness of the Multi Agency Travellers Unit and whether any changes are needed to respond to new needs.

I realise that my decisions in this matter will not please all of those who have objected to the original proposals. I do however hope that all will acknowledge that the process of consultation and consideration has been open and transparent and that, while these proposals are not a panacea, they are at least an important contribution towards providing an alternative to the illegal encampments that have for decades been such a problem in parts of our city - and that are equally unsatisfactory for the travelling communities themselves.

Peter Soulsby

City Mayor

7th January 2013