

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** PFH Housing 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009  
**AUTHOR/S:** Corporate Manager for Affordable Homes

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### INTRODUCTION OF WATER AND SERVICE CHARGE ON COUNCIL MANAGED TRAVELLERS SITES

#### Purpose

1. To obtain agreement on the introduction of a separate water and service charge for the two Traveller Sites managed by the District Council.
2. This issue was previously brought before the Portfolio Holder on 1/5/09. This report seeks to provide greater clarity and focus.
3. This is not key decision, however, a PFH decision is required on the grounds that the report recommends the approval of a new charging policy.

#### Background

4. The Council currently manages two County Council owned Traveller sites at Whaddon and Blackwell for which the Council receives a management fee from the County Council. Any surplus or deficit at the end of the financial year on the site accounts belongs to the County Council. The collection of separate water charges therefore has no direct financial impact on South Cambridgeshire District Council.
5. Historically, both sites were opened as transit sites. A fixed pitch fee was charged which covered all costs for the use of the pitch as most families only stayed for short periods of time. Over the years the sites have become full time residences for most of the current families.
6. Up to now residents have paid for their water through their pitch fee where it has been treated as an expense of the site rather than charged for separately .
7. It has been recognised that this is not the best way to recover water costs. Water, like electricity, is a service utility that is not eligible for Housing Benefit and should be paid for by way of a separate discrete charge. Individuals on the sites already pay for electricity on pitches through card meters. If residents wish to use gas, they supply their own bottles. This proposal brings payment for water use in line with those employed for electricity and gas.

#### Considerations

8. Pitch fees are set by the County Council. The County Council has not increased the pitch fee for the past four years and therefore a reduction in pitch fees is not anticipated as a result of separating out the element for water service charges. Pitch fees are charged as follows:

Blackwell	£57.50 per pitch per week
Whaddon	12 pitches @ £43.00 per week

Plus 2 (larger) pitches @ £64.50 per week

9. East Cambridgeshire and Fenland District Council already raise a water and service charge, collected by their Travellers' Officers from site residents. Both authorities annually review their charges and, for some sites, include a charge for additional rubbish clearance. These authorities currently charge between £4 and £5 per week for a water and service charge.
10. The water is metered at Blackwell and Whaddon and analysis of the usage over the past four years indicates that a charge of £4.87 per week per pitch will be sufficient to meet the current costs of water usage. This charge is in line with that charged at sites elsewhere in the County.
11. Collection of the water charge would be monitored and the level of the charge reviewed at the end of the financial year in line with other charges.

### Options

12. The Council may retain the current situation, and not introduce a water and service charge. Continuing water costs would be met as part of the site budget that is paid for through pitch fees, which is met by Housing Benefit for some Travellers. As utilities are ineligible for Housing Benefit, this is not considered a suitable or legal option.
13. To introduce a weekly water service charge of £4.87 per pitch as from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2009.

### Implications

14.	Financial	As set out in paragraphs 4 and 9 above.
	Legal	The licence agreements will be amended to reflect the new charges. There are no clauses in the licence to prevent this.
	Staffing	The charge would be collected by the Travellers' Site Officers, on a weekly basis, as is the case with the pitch fees.
	Risk Management	There is a risk of non-payment by residents particularly those in receipt of full housing benefit. Full face-to-face consultation will take place to minimise this risk. The responsibility of collecting the charges and recovering debts will be the responsibility of Housing Services. Former debt collection will be set as a sundry debt.  As pitch fees are currently collected on-site, the risk in terms of cash handling and lone working is not increased.
	Equal Opportunities	None

## Effect on strategic aims

15.	<b>Commitment to being a listening council, providing first class services accessible to all.</b>
	None specific
	<b>Commitment to ensuring that South Cambridgeshire continues to be a safe and healthy place for all.</b>
	None specific
	<b>Commitment to making South Cambridgeshire a place in which residents can feel proud to live.</b>
	Providing an equitable service will promote community cohesion and social inclusion.
<b>Commitment to assisting provision for local jobs for all.</b>	
None specific	
<b>Commitment to providing a voice for rural life.</b>	
None specific	

## Consultation

16. The County Council Traveller Liaison Officer has responded in favour of the introduction of a water charge.

## Recommendation

17. To introduce a weekly water service charge of £4.87 per pitch at both of the District Council managed Travellers Sites to be effective from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2009. This will be reviewed annually from 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010.

**Background Papers:** Report to Portfolio Holder for Staffing on the potential introduction of water charges on Council managed Traveller sites (1/5/09).

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