

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Staffing Portfolio Holder 12 March 2009
AUTHOR/S: Executive Director / Corporate Manager for Affordable Homes

TRAVELLERS' ISSUES - POSITION STATEMENT AND STOCK CONDITION SURVEY

Purpose

1. To update the Portfolio Holder in respect of Travellers' Issues and seek approval to incur expenditure to undertake traveller site surveys for the purposes of seeking grant funding from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).

Background

2. The Gypsy and Traveller Team Leader has been in post since August 2008 with the remit of managing the two County Council-owned Travellers' Sites at Whaddon and Blackwell as well as providing a "Travellers' Officer" service to the wider travelling community.
3. There were issues relating to both sites that needed attention including:
 - (a) Repairs service – that being provided was not meeting organisational guidelines for timescales and as such many residents were waiting months for repairs to be carried out.
 - (b) Improvements required to the entrance of the Blackwell site.
 - (c) Pitch fees – no rents / pitch fee system in place to enable easy reconciliation of pitch fee payments
 - (d) Water rates – water charges are being paid as a site expense rather than being borne by the residents directly. Water is a utility and therefore not eligible for Housing Benefit. Residents already pay electricity charges through prepayment meters and supply their own gas bottles, where gas is used.
 - (e) Internal issues relating to the provision of services to the sites due to historic issues and problems.
 - (f) A requirement for site surveys to be carried out on both Whaddon and Blackwell in order to submit funding bids to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) for refurbishment / improvement works to the sites.

Considerations

4. The repairs service had been at best sporadic and at worst non-existent, primarily due to the following factors:
 - There was no official contract between the DLO and the site management team in place.
 - Contractors were not permitted to visit sites alone, therefore it was an expensive exercise constantly sending two men to carry out the job of one.

These issues have now been addressed through an agreement that repairs (where possible) will be carried out on specific days each week. This means that residents can now enjoy a service better aligned with that provided to housing tenants. It also enables contractors to visit to carry out multiple repairs on the same day and provides a cost benefit to the DLO.

5. A bid was made for grant funding to carry out improvement works to the entrance to the Blackwell site. These improvements are to include a log cabin office / community room and landscaping. Grant funding was secured from Communities and Local Government and commitment received from Cambridgeshire County Council to match-fund to enable the project to proceed. Costs have been obtained for the landscaping and the Council is currently carrying out preparation works to enable selection and installation of the community building. Improvement works are also well underway to Mere Way, the byway that runs along the back of the site. Additional funding has also been provided to enable the art project to be continued and finished by the children. This is scheduled for during the Easter holidays and it is anticipated that the site entrance will be completed around the same time.
6. It has been impossible to include the pitch fees within the rents system as the sites are County Council-owned and therefore cannot be included within the district council's rent system. Options were looked at for this, but to date nothing has been suggested which would make economic sense, all other solutions proving very expensive.
7. The Council's Senior Management Team is currently exploring options to address the issue of water charges and will bring forward proposals for Members' consideration in due course.
8. An Awareness Project is being put together to increase awareness within the Council of Gypsy and Travellers lives and issues. Along with Equality and Diversity training, it is anticipated that this will address some of the issues that have existed to date and improve the service provided to Gypsies and Travellers.
9. Funding bids need to be submitted to the HCA by 30 June 2009. It is anticipated that we would make a bid for funding for refurbishment of both County-owned sites incorporating in both cases an additional plot, meaning that we could apply for 100% funding of the project.

Options

10. To submit a bid for funding to the HCA, the Council will have to undertake:
 - (a) A full survey of both sites, prepare a condition survey to include existing roads, amenity buildings, hardstandings, fences and walls and obtain a report to include recommendations for repairing and refurbishing the same
 - (b) Redesign of each site to include an additional plot on each of them.
 - (c) A full survey of drainage / sewerage systems on each site including recommendations for improvement/refurbishment.

The approximate cost of this work will be up to £20,000.

Implications

Financial Implications

11. Quotes have been obtained from various specialist consultants to undertake the work detailed above. Although the costs for feasibility studies cannot be met through grant funding, up to 10% of the cost of a scheme can be applied to professional fees / charges, therefore it is feasible that some or all of the initial cost of surveys could be recouped through the grant bid. The improved site amenities would mean that costs

of repair and maintenance would be significantly reduced. Funding is available to undertake these surveys from the Travellers' Contingency Budget.

Legal Implications

12. None specific.

Staffing Implications

13. Refurbishment would have a positive effect on staffing by reducing the amount of time currently devoted to dealing with repair issues arising from old or inefficient systems or equipment.

Risk Management Implications

14. None specific.

Equal Opportunities Implications

15. In line with general and specific statutory duties under the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Council operates a Race Equality Scheme (RES) in order to eliminate unlawful discrimination and to promote race equality and good race relations. The Scheme gives priority to actions relating to Travellers as the biggest ethnic minority in the district (around 1.7% of the district's population).

Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities

16.	<p>Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future</p> <p>Actions planned and undertaken demonstrate continuing partnership working with Cambridgeshire County Council to ensure that the Traveller sites are efficiently and effectively managed.</p>
	<p>Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community</p> <p>None specific</p>
	<p>Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work</p> <p>The proposals enhance the quality of life and safety of the residents on the Blackwell site, providing a sustainable environment into the future</p>

Recommendation

17. That the Portfolio Holder note the contents of the report and approve the allocation of up to £20k funding from the 2009-2010 Travellers' Contingency budget to undertake the site surveys referred to in paragraph 9 above and enable bids to be submitted for site improvements at Blackwell and Whaddon.

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