

**TRAVELLER SITES REVIEW INCLUDING SERVICE CHARGES**

To: Regulatory Services Committee

Date: 4 June 2018

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[T12]

1.0 **ISSUE**

1.1 To receive a review of the Traveller Sites.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

2.1 Members are requested to:

- (i) Note the contents of this report;
- (ii) Approve that the rents and service charges remain at their existing levels;
- (iii) Agree that any surplus service charges may be used to cover immediate maintenance issues on the sites;
- (iv) Agree to utilise the rental income to cover refurbishment requests for the sites, and;
- (v) Authorise the Traveller Liaison Officer to explore funding opportunities to re-open the Burwell traveller site and bring a further report back to this Committee on those findings

3.0 **BACKGROUND/OPTIONS**

3.1 ECDC has 3 Gypsy Traveller sites; Wentworth, Earith and Burwell. The latter has been closed since 2015. The Wentworth site is fully owned and run by ECDC while Earith and Burwell are currently owned by Cambridgeshire County Council and managed by ECDC.

3.2 The two open sites have a current weekly rent of £85 per week with a £10 weekly service charge for the use of water. Electric is paid for directly by the residents with the use of a meter key and therefore not part of the service charge.

- 3.3 The Wentworth site has 9 pitches. Most of the residents have lived there since it opened 30 years ago. It is an average size site in a right angled shape with one narrow road that runs between each pitch.

Earith has 11 residents with a mixture of young and old, some having been on site for over 20 years. The site is larger than Wentworth and in a more curved shape which has been redeveloped in the past. Originally there was a line of plots to the middle of the site but these were removed due to an inability to rent them out. The abandoned sites became a dumping ground for rubbish. The site was redesigned and extra land was given to residents, allowing them additional parking spaces and a small patch of garden.

- 3.4 While Wentworth is a very settled and quiet site with very few issues, Earith has historically seen anti-social behaviour and family disputes. However extensive community engagement work by ECDC over the years has brought about change to Earith which is now a relatively quiet site where families have grown and flourished.

- 3.5 When I started this role as the Traveller Liaison Officer, it was noted that Wentworth was a settled site with few issues other than basic maintenance problems.

- 3.6 When I started this role there was an issue with rubbish on site that caused an eye-sore to the residents and to passers-by. It consisted of everything from sofas to children's toys and gas bottles. It was a hazard to those residents and visitors coming on to the site as rubbish was piled both at the entrance and opposite road (Environmental Agency land).

This has been a recurring issue throughout the sites history and required determination to stop it from happening in the future. Litter was also piled at the end of the site, by Plot 6, which has for many years been abandoned and boarded up. It was an area covered by empty bottles, soil and other waste material that would be left to grow.

- 3.7 Due to the health hazards and the visible growth of waste getting rid of the waste was a priority. Rubbish was no longer kept to the entrance of the site but also started straying onto the road side which was a potential danger to motorists and health hazard to all residents. Much of the waste had been there for years, degrading away and causing rats to form near the entrance and run on to the site.

In March 2018 I employed a waste removal team with a grab lorry to remove all entrance and roadside rubbish. Over 2.2 tonnes of waste was recorded and removed purely from the entrance area.

I am pleased to advise that this has not re occurred since my intervention. Evidence has shown that residents are now working together and getting rid of their rubbish responsibly. This has brought about a greater community connection between all residents.

The rubbish opposite the site has posed more of a problem as it is land owned by the Environment Agency. We have, and continue to, work with the EA to get this fly tip removed and look at measures to prevent further fly tips from occurring.

- 3.8 One family who lived on two plots on Earith site had abandoned their plots in February without informing ECDC. The brick buildings on site were damaged. One building was bereft of kitchen fixtures, boiler and piping while the other received superficial damage to the inside before being targeted again with piping and boiler being taken.

All procedures were followed correctly by ECDC after the abandonment and concrete bollards were placed outside both plots to stop any illegal encampments turning up while refurbishment work was carried out. As the site is still owned by the County Council all refurbishment costs were met by them. The entire process from abandonment to completion of refurbishment took 3 months and is now occupied by new tenants.

- 3.9 Earith is made up of three main families who are linked via marriage. They are a fiercely tight knit unit who were wary of strangers, especially officials. When officers from health and education or indeed any visitors had attempted to go on site in the past they were ignored or told to leave. It was also noted that the issues of getting services like the education welfare team, health both - mental and physical, and advice groups would be difficult to get on to site as no individual would allow them into their property and there was no place for them on site to meet in a more controlled, open environment.

Such problems can cause isolation, residents won't ask for help, health inoculations won't be carried out and children won't attend school for fear of integration.

There is an empty brick building on the Earith site that has been in disrepair for many years. The plan has been to turn this dilapidated building into a Community Centre that can be used by all residents for a variety of different services, including education, health, benefits, fire safety, etc.

I voiced my thought of a community hub with the residents, welcoming their ideas. Whilst they were sceptical, mistrustful and cold to the idea in the beginning, slowly over time, and with 3 residents having new-born babies, acceptance of a Community Centre soon rang through as an investment for their children's futures - the offer of a community centre grew to be appreciated.

I contacted voluntary and statutory agencies to get their support in working on site with the residents. Once the Hub is open the following organisations will regularly be on site:

- CREDS
- Surestart

- Ely Children's Centre
- Police
- Fire service
- Mind
- Ormiston

A successful bid of £5000 to the Community Safety Partnership was submitted to help with the refurbishment costs. Work has begun on clearing out the rubbish inside before refurbishment work can commence. I have also applied for funding from the Lotto for £10,000 to help secure appliances and materials for services.

Once the centre is open, there will be many options available to residents, and Gypsy Roma and Travellers (GRT) throughout East Cambs. The aspiration is to make the GRT feel more included and integrated with other communities. This can serve to help bring services in the form of more extracurricular activities that GRT are interested in like boxing, beauty, trade work from the local community and have them working with our young.

It will also serve to help keep our young people in education by having educators come onto site from groups like Adult Education, Ormiston and Traveller's Education.

3.10 I am currently setting up a youth team that will help young GRT in East Cambs to find their voice and help break down barriers and show a new perspective of GRT life via the use of media. I currently have two young people writing articles which will be posted within a national GRT magazine and website. Once the community centre is ready, we will have a base to operate from and the youth team will become an East England media team that will connect with the West via the Traveller's Times Magazine.

3.11 I have started opportunities for Gypsies and Travellers within the East Cambridgeshire District. These include:

- Facilitating young Travellers to gain experience by working on professional production days at the BBC studio in Norwich (main base for BBC Look East). This is currently being advertised through the Travellers' Times – a national Gypsy Traveller magazine and the production class will begin in the near future.
- The Traveller's Times are also interested in connecting with us to open more opportunities to Gypsies and Travellers in the East. This includes doing articles and recordings of GRT in the area to help boost the voice of east England GRT. This is a great opportunity which could bring positive media to East Cambridgeshire District Council.

- The Romany Theatre Company and other charity groups have shown interest in working with us on a cultural awareness level – again bringing positive media and serving to create better relations between two communities. This will likely begin in summer.

3.12 White Ribbon is a charity looking to bring an end to domestic violence to women and is something that I am championing. I have written an article for a prominent GRT magazine and have set the task to my young youth group members to do the same, focusing on their experiences. I am also arranging for our young people to attend the BBC studio in Norwich to record their personal history surrounding issues like domestic violence, women's empowerment, women in education etc.

3.13 ECDC are responsible for ongoing maintenance and repairs with some responsibilities down to the tenant. Working on both sites and visiting the residents, I noticed more and more maintenance issues that were needing to be fixed, from the minimal changing of light bulbs to the grander need to fix fences, waste collection, brick building refurbishments.

When I started it was noted that there were a lot of maintenance issues including new lights, leaking taps, broken toilets and broken windows. I have worked with the Maintenance Team to re-prioritise maintenance issues which are now done effectively, efficiently and promptly. As maintenance issues are an on-going issue, most will be resolved within a two week timeframe although my aim is to improve on this timeline. Maintenance costs are covered by the housing budget.

In order to bring the sites up to a decent standard larger levels of refurbishments are needed. Refurbishment work will need to be done on both sites in the near future as issues on site are growing. These include potholes, broken fencing, and condensation mould in the brick buildings. These are standard issues that are inevitable in any residency. Budget restraints have maintenance has had to take a back seat but if we want residents to care for their pitches then we need to ensure that their living quarters are not sub standard.

3.14 Rent and service charges are paid on both sites on a Friday either by cash to me or via Direct Debit of which only one resident pays. The total cost of rent and service charge is £95 per week, £85 rent and £10 service charge (irrespective of any housing benefit entitlement).

All payments are collected on paper forms, copied and then sent to the Finance Department and money posted to the bank.

Previously, rent and service charge payments made by the residents was difficult to manage due to records being kept by the Finance Team and information on benefits not being shared – this meant it was difficult to keep on top of arrears, advise the residents of under or over payments and, on occasions, getting them into arrears through no fault of their own.

As there was no defined Traveller Liaison Officer for the District, money would be picked up by various individuals but usually the County Council Traveller Liaison Officer, who was unable to monitor the finances or deal with site issues due to time constraints. This led to obvious arrears and no ability to arrange alternative payments if their circumstances changed.

Since joining ECDC I have introduced a spreadsheet to include the entire yearly payments of rent and service charge payments. By doing this, each resident can be analysed for patterns in their payment history and find those who were lacking versus those keeping on top of payments.

I now have an in-depth knowledge of all residents and have arranged payment plans for those who are behind. I am currently running at a 100 percent rental payment level from residents, minus two residents who are new and are awaiting housing benefit. As for service charges, there is 90 percent collection rate for both sites with payment plans being put in place for two individuals who are in arrears.

We have also had financial expenditure at the Earith site due to foreign objects being placed within the waste system, meaning that our contractor (Dalrod) has to go out to fix the problem, costing various amounts depending on the problem. This has been anywhere between £70 and £270. This has been an on-going problem that has diminished funds for other projects as well as potentially causing health hazards of backed-up sewage that could potentially overflow onto the site via the drainage system.

After speaking with the residents and explaining the issues that arise from such actions and also sending out letters to remind them of negative consequences, we would find a lull in activity but this would only last around 3-4 weeks before the waste system would be blocked once again.

After motor oil was put into the system, causing real damage to the system, it was decided that costs would be put upon the residents, each carrying a portion of responsibility and cost. None have yet paid for the repair but since that point (early May 2018) no call outs have been made which we are hopeful to continue.

- 3.15 In South Cambridgeshire, Whaddon and Blackwell sites pay £71.50 per week in rent. Whaddon pay quarterly charges directly to the Anglian water but residents pay £10 per month for the upkeep of the sewage treatment plant while Blackwell pay £9 per week service charge.

Earith Site:

For Earith Site the cost of services (water) for the year 2016/17 was £3162.57.

For the residents on site the charge was £5720.  
This has brought the District Council a surplus of £2557.43.

Wentworth:

For Wentworth the cost of services (water) for the year 2016/17 was £1832.43.

For the residents on site the charge for the same year was £4680  
This has brought the District Council a surplus of £2847.57.

Together the surplus for the year was £5405.00

For the year 2017/18 the cost of services to Earith and Wentworth went up to £3597.98 and £2389.15, respectively.

This still gives an overall surplus of £4412.87.

Although cost has gone up for the service, the remaining surplus shows that raising service charges would be premature and would likely cause resistance within the community. The information suggests that there is no need in the present time for service charges to be raised as it appears the residents are already paying more for water than is being used. Remaining with the status quo will leave the residents with consistency and still allow a comfortable surplus margin for ECDC if charges were to rise.

- 3.16 As previously advised funding has been applied for from the Big Lottery Fund. We are hoping for £10,000 from 'Awards for all' to help go toward the community centre on the Earith site, to help boost the £5000 we currently have from the CSP. This money will help to bring in services to aid young people in education and possibly finding work available to them.

Heritage fund for cultural awareness programmes will be applied for once we have a youth team together which will be used to help with community cohesion between the settled and non-settled community via media. The amount requested will be £10,000 to cover costs of filming equipment, software, and other media related materials.

Other funding for large scale works of refurbishment for both sites is scarce. The usual awards by the Department for Communities and Local Government no longer cover refurbishment work. This makes any funding for refurbishments for Earith and Wentworth sites very difficult. The options for funding may be provided for by the District Council via the surplus money made from service charges and potentially from money made via rental income, making the two sites fully self-sustainable. The overall surplus service charge of 2017/18 was £4412.87 and rental income was £88400. This would bring in £92812.87 per year to allow for larger works to be carried out on two sites that have seen little financial support for over twenty years.

An option would be to make such funds available for a limited period that allows the sites to gain large repairs without taking away the income on a permanent basis.

3.17 Burwell is still closed due to the murder on site that took place in 2015. Since then the site was demolished and all brick buildings knocked down due to individuals returning to the site and causing damage.

The site itself was owned by the Cambridgeshire County Council and run by the ECDC Both sites are still owned by Cambridgeshire County Council but will be passed over to ECDC in the near future.

The Opinion Research services 2016 who carried out the research on Gypsy Traveller Accommodation needs for 2016-2036 has stated of East Cambridgeshire that:

*'...there is **no need for any additional pitches** in East Cambridgeshire for Gypsy and Traveller households that meet the new definition; a need for up to 40 additional pitches for Gypsy and Traveller households that may meet the new definition – although if the national average of 10% were to be applied this could be as few as 4 additional pitches; and a need for 10 additional pitches for Gypsy and Traveller households who do not meet the new definition.'*

However, this research was based on Burwell site as being open and used – giving 29 Public sites. At the moment we are 8 plots down and should consider the possibility to re-open the site in the future.

Anecdotally we are finding generations of families on our two sites remaining together as the younger ones don't wish to leave the area or move into housing. Although it is currently sustainable, Gypsies and Traveller women have an average of 3.5 and 5.9 children respectively which puts the needs assessments of Gypsy and Travellers at a growth rate of around 3%. With Niner (2003) and the Communities and Local Government (2007) that number has been dropped to a growth rate of 1.5%.

This is likely due to the definition of Gypsies and Travellers changing within the planning regulations (CLG 2015a), thus causing the number of pitches being required dropping as less and less Gypsies and Travellers are able to reach the heights of the new definition.

However in time we will find families who have lived in the area for many years, unable to remain due to no spaces available.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (formally the Department for Communities and Local Government) have funds that can be applied for new developments. It can be applied for either as a grant or match funding. Usually such funds are only available to new developments but it is likely that, due to the Burwell site being fully demolished, funding would cover the rebuild. It has been seen with Harlow Council that funding has been

applied for which covered the building of additional plots with a refurbishment to uninhabitable brick buildings on a Gypsy site.

- 3.18 Moving forward I am looking to work more to keep young GRT in education. I have connections with adult education groups who will be willing to run courses for GRT to help them gain basic qualifications if they can receive funding to outreach on our sites. This would include more advanced subjects including engineering, media, languages and law. It would be a boost to all GRT to see individuals from the community achieving what was once thought closed to them.

#### 4.0 ARGUMENTS/CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 Although the cost of water has increased, the remaining surplus shows that there is no need to raise service charges and would likely cause resistance within the community.
- 4.2 As is evidenced, East Cambs has one of the highest levels of rent charges in the County. It is therefore recommended that the rent remain at the same level.
- 4.3 Using surplus money made from service charges could help to fix specific issues on both sites. Issues such as broken fencing, condensation damp and filling of potholes would help with the visual and health benefits of each site. Spending surplus money paid for by the GRT community on the GRT community would send a positive message through the minority group and would help strengthen relationships between them and ECDC. Also, using some of the rental money collected for their rent and spending it on larger refurbishment needs, the GRT community would directly feel the benefit of their contribution. By doing so, both sites will reach a satisfactory standard of quality of living.
- 4.4 To re-open Burwell, it is necessary to understand that ECDC has an obligation to accommodate those of different cultures and beliefs. As stated in the Research paper, no new pitches are need beyond a possible 2 up to 2036. However, the research was based on Burwell being open. Without this site, we are running at a loss – both toward our obligation to the GRT but also on a financial level. Burwell housed 8 pitches and at the current rate of £85, this would mean we are losing £35,360 per year in rental fees every year that it is closed.

The argument against re-opening is cost. Seeing the site as it is now, it is difficult to estimate a price for returning it to an 8 pitch site. The demolished buildings are still on site and must be removed for work to begin. However, we, via the County council still own the land and would find it easier to re-open a past site than to go through the planning process to find other positions. The re-opening of Burwell is the most straightforward conclusion and likely to be the cheapest and most timely. Gaining funding via the Ministry of Communities and

Local Government is a possibility but it would need more research into financial cost before a conclusion can be made.

## 5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS/EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

5.1 There are no financial implications to ECDC by keeping the service charge at the same level.

There are no financial implications to ECDC by keeping the rent at the same level.

There are no financial implications to ECDC for work being done to the Community Centre, Youth Group or other groups being set up for the GRT community.

There are no financial implications to ECDC by re-opening the Burwell site in the future if funding can be achieved from the Ministry of Communities and Local Government.

Surplus service charges and rent payments being held for the GRT sites will cause financial implications to ECDC at a cost of their choosing and for a temporary period until the sites are up to a satisfactory level.

5.2 Equality Impact Assessment (INRA) not required

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<u>Background Documents</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Contact Officer</u>
None	Room 115 The Grange, Ely	Andrew Lamb Traveller Liaison Officer (01353) 616349 E-mail: Andrew.Lamb <a href="mailto:Andrew.Lamb@eastcambs.gov.uk">@eastcambs.gov.uk</a>