

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 19 July 2007

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director(s) – Environment, and Health and Community

SUBJECT: Travellers - Provision of Transit Site

WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.1 To consider the need for and the options for the provision of a permanent transit site for Travellers within the Borough

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION: That:- The Executive Board agree to the strategy and process outlined in paragraph 5.1 of this report**

3.0 **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

3.1 Over recent years there have been a significant number of incursions of Travellers both into Widnes and Runcorn. Evidence shows that the travellers move predominantly into industrial areas, where usually large tracts of land can be found.

To secure the removal of the Travellers a process of serving notice and employing bailiffs when required has been used but in essence all this often served to do was to move the Travellers onto another site.

This process has proven not only to be inefficient but also hugely expensive. In an average 12 month period this approach together with the consequential clean up costs, can cost the Authority upwards of £200,000. This figure, having regard to the general shortfall of transit pitches and the Council's recent adoption of additional areas of highway is unlikely to decrease. Indeed, unless positive action is taken it could increase.

3.2 Between December,2006 and the present day the approach adopted has been somewhat different. Both before Christmas (06) and then again afterwards, a length of un-used bus way has been utilised as a tolerated/accepted unauthorised encampment for the Travellers, thus working with them and managing the situation as opposed to chasing them from site to site.

Largely this approach has been successful and has led to increased cooperation between the Council and Police in swiftly dealing with

the small number of other unlawful encampments that have occurred.

- 3.3 The site currently being used does not, however, offer a permanent solution. The bus way will be relied upon to provide access to two key development sites, which form part of the wider Castlefields regeneration proposals. These sites are likely to be taken to market at some time during 2008 and their subsequent development will follow. Delaying this process would have serious financial consequences and impact upon the implementation of the ongoing regeneration programme in Castlefields.

With this in mind the need to identify an alternative “transit” site location, if the current success is to be built upon, needs to be progressed with some urgency.

- 3.4 The alternative site search process initially gave rise to a number of possible locations, however, when tested against guiding criteria, for example, the right size, close to transport links/facilities, would not prejudice investment, was available within reasonable time and was within the catchment area identified by the Needs Study(see 4.1), only one viable option remained. The attached plan shows the location of the preferred site.

- 3.5 The preferred site is located next to an established permanent private caravan site and between Warrington Road and the Manchester Ship Canal. It is land that is in Council ownership. It presently forms an area of informal green space, not generally accessed or used by the public.

The land although readily available and on assessment likely to receive planning permission for the use intended, is not entirely without development difficulty. Having previously had dredgings deposited upon it, the land is particularly uneven and would require considerable engineering work to create a level and accessible pitch area for the caravans. Notwithstanding the complexity of the engineering it can be anticipated that the scheme can be provided within the identified budget.

If it is decided to progress with this option it will be necessary to work the existing detail up into formal working drawings and documents and then to go through a tender process to ensure best value is achieved.

- 3.6 The timescale for delivery of the site having regard to the time needed to prepare for statutory consents, tendering and then the subsequent construction period is estimated at between 12-15 months from the date when authority is given to proceed.

4.0 **NEED FOR SITES**

4.1 The report on the Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Assessment commissioned by the Cheshire partnership authorities and which has already been considered by the Cheshire Sub Regional Leaders' Group suggests that there is an overall need for 25-47 pitches on transit sites throughout the sub region. It is worth noting that whilst St Helens and Warrington are amongst the partnership authorities, the study does not embrace the wider Merseyside region. Allowing for one scheme of 21 pitches already in development in St Helens, there is a residual need of 26 pitches.

The present tolerated site at Haddocks Wood accommodates 17 pitches and if Halton were to proceed with the provision of a permanent facility of 15 pitches, it would be going a long way to fill the current identified sub regional shortfall and be playing its fullest part in addressing the Traveller issue.

Within Merseyside there are permanent sites situated in Liverpool(14 pitches), Sefton(17), St Helens(20). There is no transit site provision although, as mentioned above, St Helens has secured funding to start such a site. Indeed, there are only 14 transit site pitches within the North West, all in Salford.

Having a transit site increases the enforcement powers available to both the LA and the Police.

There are also a number of less measurable benefits, which arise from being able to provide the Traveller community with some stability such as the provision of welfare and education facilities. An exercise to quantify this benefit is currently being progressed.

5.0 **SUGGESTED WAY FORWARD**

5.1 It is suggested that if the Executive Board support the provision of a Transit site in the location identified:

- That a detailed scheme be worked up to tender to confirm delivery within the set budget;
- that a further report on funding be presented to the Executive Board once tenders have been received;
- that subject to this being confirmed, formal permissions/consents be applied for (September 2007).

Subject to this process the site should be available by September 2008.

6.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 The basic capital cost of the scheme (initially estimated at

£450,000) can be met from reserves within the Housing Capital programme. A similar amount for a toilet and amenity block would also be required. Government Office has been approached to see whether there could be some further financial support. A further report on funding issues will be made once tenders have been received.

- 6.2 There will also be on going revenue implications. The site will have to be maintained and managed. An estimate of these costs is attached to this report.

This estimate is based on the premise that a Traveller could be contracted to permanently reside on and manage the site(a similar arrangement exists at the Riverview site)

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

- 7.1 Evidence suggests that the provision of a site has reduced the number of incursions elsewhere and enabled the situation to be better managed. It cannot, however, be totally discounted that once the facility is at capacity other incursions and costs for dealing with them, will occur.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 8.1 Local consultation will be carried out before the proposal is formally considered. Provision of a transit site in addition to the existing permanent site would make a significant contribution to the Council's efforts to support equality and diversity.

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
1 st Draft of Accommodation Assessment	Rutland House	Phil Watts