

Executive 21st December 2023

Minute 553 - Travellers Temporary Stopping Site Land at Junction 3 of the A14, Rothwell

The Chair invited Cllr Jim Hakewill to address the meeting. Cllr Hakewill suggested that the proposal before members should be considered within the emerging Gypsy and Traveller Local Plan process and made reference to the public consultation on the scope and options of the proposal and associated Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report that had taken place between 5th April and 31st May 2023, noting that the projected timescale for the North Northamptonshire Gypsy and Traveller Local Plan proposed consultation on the draft in Spring 2024.

Cllr Hakewill expressed the view that local communities should be confident of the processes involved in decision making and be aware when major policy decisions such as provision for the Gypsy and Traveller community would be scrutinised. Cllr Hakewill made reference to negative public perception of the site being used as proposed, effectively destroying a valuable green space.

Reference was made to the proposed cost of the project and whether it would provide value for money given the anticipated usage of the facility once complete in light of financial pressures affecting the Council's budget. Cllr Hakewill concluded by requesting that the item be withdrawn and considered as part of the consultation process for the North Northamptonshire Gypsy and Traveller Local Plan.

The Chair thanked Cllr Hakewill for his comments before inviting Cllr Matt Keane to address the Executive. Cllr Keane noted that there was a need for a facility such as that proposed, but queried which other locations had been considered and what would happen should the facility be over-subscribed if opened. Cllr Keane also sought feedback on the Council's unsuccessful bid for the government's Traveller Site Fund.

The Chair thanked Cllr Keane for his contribution and invited Mr Mike Blissett to speak to the Executive. Mr Blissett called for a decision on the proposal to be delayed until a site feasibility investigation had been completed and for it to be considered alongside the development of the Gypsy and Traveller Local Plan.

Mr Blissett contended that the site in question was not suitable for the proposed development, with issues relating to construction costs, loss of significant wildlife interest and local road congestion, suggesting alternative sites in the area that could be easier to convert, with lower potential running costs.

Mr Blissett noted the opposition to the proposal from Rothwell Town Council, the potential costs of the facility being above those detail in the report, including ongoing operating costs being a liability on taxpayers and the potential lack of use of the site once constructed.

The Chair thanked Mr Blissett for attending and speaking and invited Cllr Dorothy Maxwell to address the Executive. Cllr Maxwell spoke to note that the proposal would be of great benefit in reducing the number of unauthorised encampments in the area. Cllr Maxwell queried the cost implications for operating and maintenance costs and enforcement at the site, if required.

The Chair thanked all the speakers for their comments and invited Cllr David Howes, Executive Member for Rural Communities and Localism to introduce a report that detailed the rationale, work required, methodology and estimated costs to provide a Travellers Temporary Stopping Site on land in Council ownership adjacent to Junction 3 of the A14, Rothwell. The report also sought approval to add £1.3m to the Council's capital programme for 2024/25 and approve that borrowing in order to fund the project. Approval was also sought to procure and contract the delivery of the project to be delivered within the next two financial years.

Cllr Howes made reference to comments made by the speakers in regard to alternative sites, the intended use for the site at the point of purchase and the potential costs for development of the site. It was heard that the government's Travellers Site Fund had been heavily oversubscribed, with further funding bids possible should the government make available any future pots of funding.

Cllr Howes noted that there remained a strategic need for temporary stopping place provision within the Council area, as demonstrated by the 2019 Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment, with such provision providing a safe and secure place with suitable welfare facilities for groups of travellers passing through the Council's area to stop for a period of up to 28 days.

Details were provided to the meeting of the positive location of the site in terms of connectivity and reference was made to the additional powers that provision of such a site would allow the police in regard to unauthorised encampments, directing Traveller groups to go to the temporary stopping place or leave the Council area.

Cllr Helen Harrison spoke to welcome the movement towards provision of a stopping site in the Council area, noting that the facilities available at the site would have a beneficial impact on the welfare of Travellers and need for such a facility from a Public Health perspective.

Cllr David Brackenbury welcomed the report and the concept behind it, noting that there was a genuine need for the site as a means of preventing unauthorised encampments in the Council area.

Cllr Lloyd Bunday noted the additional controls over unauthorised encampments that provision of a stopping site would provide. The meeting heard that the site in question had previously been purchased by the former Kettering Borough Council with a view to commercial development.

Cllr Mark Rowley spoke to note that provision of a stopping site had been requested for some time by the Rural Forum and that the report, if approved, would recommend the project to Full Council for further consideration.

Cllr Matt Binley spoke to note that creation of a stopping site would provide support to travellers entering the Council's area as well as providing the Council and police with a useful tool in preventing unauthorised encampments. Cllr Binley noted the sensitivity of the issue but noted that there remained a strategic need for temporary stopping place provision in North Northamptonshire.

The Chair spoke to state the report before members was the simply the beginning of the process for creating temporary stopping provision, the proposal would need to go through the usual planning processes including consultation that all interested stakeholders could engage with.

Cllr Howes concluded debate by noting that there was potential to generate income to offset the running costs of the proposed site by charging occupiers a weekly rental fee per pitch in addition to a refundable damage deposit. A number of potential sites had been considered, with officers recommending the proposal before members as the most suitable.

RESOLVED

KEY DECISION

That the Executive:

- a) Recommended to Full Council the approval of the project being added to the 2024/25 Capital Programme to deliver the Travellers Temporary Stopping site and establish a budget of £1,300,000 to be funded through borrowing.
- b) Delegated authority to the Executive Member for Rural Communities and Localism in consultation with the Executive Director for Place and Economy to submit an application for planning permission for the project and procure the necessary works to provide the Travellers Temporary Stopping site, and undertake any other actions required to deliver the project within the approved financial envelope.

Reason for Recommendations :

- To procure and undertake the required works in line with the Council's constitution and financial regulations in relation to governance.
- There is a strategic need to make provision for temporary stopping places to serve the North Northamptonshire area, as demonstrated by the 2019 Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA).
- Currently there are no temporary stopping places for transient travellers passing through the NNC area to use which would provide safe and secure places to stop with suitable facilities.

- Provision of a temporary stopping place within the Council's area would enable the Council and the Police to better manage UEs within the Council's area and limit the adverse impacts of UEs on settled communities.

Alternative Options Considered

- The only other option available is to do nothing, however this would not address the strategic need for a temporary stopping place within the Council area, which provides a safe and secure place to stop with suitable facilities and would not allow the Council and the Police working together to exercise 'direction' powers available to them in law to better manage UEs and their impact on settled communities.
- Alternative locations for temporary stopping places on land in the ownership of the Council were considered prior to submitting the DHLUC Traveller Site Fund bid and disregarded as being unsuitable.