

Housing Committee Site Visit to Gypsy and Traveller Sites 9 September 2014

1. Summary

- 1.1 This appendix sets out details of the Committee's site visit to Gypsy and Traveller sites in Southwark and Greenwich. On 9 September 2014, the Committee visited two sites; an authorised site in Southwark (Brideale Close) and an unauthorised, tolerated site in Greenwich.

2. Record of site visit

- 2.1 The site visit took place to inform the Committee meeting in October. The purpose of the visit was to enable the Committee to see at first hand both an authorised and an unauthorised, tolerated site and to assess the adequacy of current provision for themselves. The Committee also had the opportunity to meet the residents at both sites.

Authorised site

- 2.2 At the Southwark authorised site the Committee held discussions with Paul Jeffery, Southwark Travellers Officer; Ilinca Diaconescu, Planning Policy, London Gypsy and Travellers Unit (LGTU); and Abigail Mawer, Southwark Travellers' Action Group (STAG).
- 2.3 The site is a permanent, authorised site and there is no transit or through flow of Gypsies and Travellers. The resident community use the site as their permanent home.
- 2.4 The Committee met a resident, who has lived at the site for the past 21 years, who reported that relations between the local community and council are now very positive. She considered this to be due to good channels of communication aided by the Gypsy and Traveller support worker and through STAG who are very proactive in supporting residential needs. Consequently, the residents at the site feel they are supported by the Council and that they are able to solve issues locally.
- 2.5 The resident noted that relations with the surrounding community had considerably improved. Initially, as a community they had experienced overt discrimination; shops and pubs would display signs that forbade entrance to Gypsies and Travellers and local schools were reluctant to allocate places to Gypsy and Traveller children. She reported this is now not the case.
- 2.6 The ground rent for a pitch at the Southwark site is £111 a week for a double pitch, and £83 per week for a single pitch. All tenants at the site currently rent their pitches, however they do have the option, under Right to Buy, to purchase the land. To date none of the residents have applied to purchase a pitch.
- 2.7 Paul Jeffery, Southwark Travellers Officer, said that there is an on-going consultation on managing the allocation policy for residency on Southwark borough sites. The council is considering operating a separate formal waiting list for Gypsy and Traveller pitches, which would only be open to the Gypsy and Traveller community. The list would be held separately from the waiting list for social housing and would include consultation with current site residents. Gypsies and Travellers

traditionally live in close-knit communities and so would like to be consulted about prospective residents.

- 2.8 New families who approach the site or children of those who reside at the site tend to move on. Some resort to living in bricks and mortar, given the lack of pitches.

Unauthorised site

- 2.9 The Committee also visited an unauthorised site based in Greenwich. The Committee held discussions with Matthew Brindley (Policy Manager, Traveller Movement) and some of the residents.
- 2.10 The site is a tolerated, unauthorised site, as the council refrains from invoking enforcement action. It has been in existence for approximately 15 years and is considered to be severely overcrowded. The site is situated amongst heavy industry including a recycling dump and aggregate and cement plant. Haulage trucks run continuously on to the entrance road where the site is located.
- 2.11 The committee met a current Irish Traveller family who reported that the site community consisted of 12 adults and 24 children (plus two on the way). The family spokesperson said that they had little contact with the council since the previous liaison officer had retired. She had considered approaching other sites in Greenwich but these are generally filled with English Gypsy and Traveller families where there are long waiting lists and family members are usually given preference.
- 2.12 The family said that the site had become more dangerous recently: the adjoining pavement was demolished and so provides less of a barrier from the haulage trucks that regularly pass. The family spokesperson suggested that it would be useful to have notice of nearby developments, as they live very close to the work being undertaken. Other key problems include dust and noise from the constant industrial activity, rats, poor sanitary facilities (residents have access to a portable toilet but no shower) and severe overcrowding.
- 2.13 The family said they choose to stay at the site as they have no option other than living in bricks and mortar. For them, community is the most important thing, so splitting up the family would be less easy to bear than the inconveniences of the encampment.
- 2.14 The family spokesperson felt that the council does not pursue enforcement action against them as they do not cause any disturbance.
- 2.15 Ownership of the land on which the site is situated is unclear. The family spokesperson said she thought that the council owned a small portion of the land and the remainder was privately owned. All caravans on the site are personally owned by the residents. Ideally the family would wish to own their own piece of land to guarantee community integrity and stability.