

Report of: Planning Services Business Manager

To: Executive Board

Date: 8th October 2007

Item No:

Title of Report : Consultation on the Advice to SEERA on Gypsy and Traveller Need

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To seek the endorsement of advice to be submitted to the South East England Regional Assembly on provision of Gypsy and Traveller pitches in Oxfordshire.

Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Cllr John Goddard

Scrutiny Responsibility: Environmental Scrutiny Committee

Ward(s) affected: All

Report Approved by Michael Crofton-Briggs

Portfolio Holder: Cllr John Goddard

Legal: Jeremy Thomas

Finance: Chris Kaye


Strategic Director: Sharon Cosgrove

Policy Framework: This report supports the City Council's vision by supporting the provision of better housing for all, as well as improving Oxford's environment.

Recommendation(s): (1) To confirm that Oxford would be willing to accept development of 2 gypsy or traveller pitches to meet need during 2006-10 but is not willing at present to agree to the allocation of a further 6 pitches during the period 2011-16;

(2) To authorise the Planning Policy Manager to finalise completion of the SEERA Advice Pro-forma on the basis of this advice and submit the completed Pro-forma to SEERA. (**Note:** the draft Pro-forma has been deposited in the Members' Rooms)

Summary

1. The South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) are required by central Government to allocate a number of caravan pitches at the district level, to provide for the assessed accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers living in the region. This allocation will be through an early partial review of the South East Plan (which itself is currently in draft form).
2. Local authorities have been asked to contribute to this process, through partnership working, by
 - (a)  advising on the level of need for Gypsy and Traveller pitches in their collective area, and
 - (b) advising on how this number should be distributed between the districts which make up this area.
3. The City Council have been working within an Oxfordshire Partnership, including four other district councils in Oxfordshire together with the County Council, towards agreeing advice to be submitted. This work has been progressed via a joint Member Steering Group. Unanimous agreement could not ultimately be reached on some aspects of this advice, therefore the City Council will submit alternative advice, as detailed below, if agreed by the Executive.

Background and context

4. Government Circular 01/2006, published February 2006, set out the Government's policy on new gypsy and traveller caravan sites. In brief, the Circular aims to promote social inclusivity of the Gypsy and Traveller populations, through ensuring adequate local authority provision of sites. The Circular cross refers to the Housing Act 2004, which requires local authorities to assess the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers, by carrying out a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA). The Circular further states that regional spatial strategies should be revised to include district allocations for provision of new pitches, taking into account the results of each GTAA, and that these allocations should be carried through to provision made in local development frameworks.
5. In anticipation of this requirement coming into force, the Association of Councils in the Thames Valley Region (ACTVaR) commissioned jointly with its constituent authorities an accommodation assessment of gypsy and traveller need in the Thames Valley region. The consultants' report was published in September 2006. It found an indicative need in Oxfordshire for 57 new gypsy and traveller pitches, of which 5 pitches should be provided in Oxford (equivalent to 8-10 caravans).
6. In December 2006, the Chief Executive of SEERA wrote to all local authorities in the South East region issuing a brief for submission of advice by local authorities on the Partial Review of the South East Plan – Provision of Caravan Sites for Gypsies and Travellers. The brief requires advice to be provided jointly by principal and local authorities within a

given area. The Districts of Oxfordshire, together with Oxfordshire County Council, have therefore been working jointly towards preparing the advice requested.

7. The brief requested advice and evidence on a number of issues relating to the area covered, the main areas to be covered being:
 - (a) District based figures for permanent caravan pitches, interpreting the findings of the GTAA;
 - (b) Two spatial options for the distribution of pitches between district authorities, these being:
 - A. “a distribution which seeks to meet identified needs where they arise as identified through the GTAA and the existence of unauthorised encampments,” and
 - B. “a distribution which seeks to protect and enhance the natural environment, including its biodiversity and landscape character whilst making best use of previously developed land and existing or planned infrastructure provision; and facilitates access to employment opportunities and local services to support social inclusion.”
 - (c) Qualitative assessment of the demand for and type of transit pitch provision (i.e. temporary stopping places for caravans), and
 - (d) An explanation of how key stakeholders, including the Gypsy and Traveller communities, have been involved with the evidence gathering process.
8. SEERA are expecting a response to these and some supplementary questions by 15th October. The full draft of Oxford’s proposed response to SEERA on this issue is available in the Members’ Rooms.

Response on need for pitches

9. The Steering Group, supported by an officer group, have considered the issues in detail. It was concluded that the GTAA has overestimated the number of pitches required to meet demand in Oxfordshire. Using Government guidance¹ as a basis, the group has carefully reassessed the factors used in the published GTAA, taking into account the local dimension. The main conclusion is that there is an estimated short-term need for **11 new pitches in Oxfordshire to 2011, although none specifically arising from Oxford**. In the medium term, taking into account population growth, there is an estimated need for **a further 31 pitches in Oxfordshire 2011-2016, again none of which arise from within Oxford**.

¹ Preparing Regional Spatial Strategy Reviews on Gypsies and Travellers by Regional Planning Bodies. CLG, March 2007.

Response on distribution between districts

10. The Steering Group were unable to agree unanimously on a distribution based on Option **B** described in paragraph 7 above for the period 2011-2016. The other Partnership authorities² jointly propose an equal distribution of an additional 42 pitches for the period 2006-2016, which would mean Oxford would be expected to provide for 8 caravan pitches (equivalent to 13-16 caravans). The majority consensus of the Steering Group was that an equal division represents a modest commitment from each district. Agreement on this basis would allow a united front to be presented to SEERA, potentially strengthening the case for an overall provision of 42 pitches in Oxfordshire (compared with 97 pitches using the GTAA on a like-for-like basis). Furthermore, the Partnership would be advising a set of firm figures to cover the period to 2016, as sought by SEERA at this stage, and in common with other local authority partnerships across the South East.
11. The other Partnership authorities will therefore advise a pitch distribution based on shared responsibility between the five Districts as described above. This is, however, on the strict proviso that if a higher figure than 42 were to be allocated to Oxfordshire, the Partnership would have the opportunity to further develop this distribution, to take account of opportunities and constraints for site provision within each district.
12. However **this was not accepted by Oxford at the Steering Group meetings**, who have agreed only to recommend provision based on **an equal share between districts of estimated need in Oxfordshire to 2011** (as opposed to 2016). This would mean Oxford agreeing in principle at this stage to provide **2 caravan pitches (equivalent to 3-4 caravans)**.
13. This alternative approach requested by Oxford would be submitted on the understanding that further joint work would be needed with the other District and County Councils to agree how to distribute a further 31 pitches needed 2011-16, or similarly to distribute any higher number than 11 pitches which may be suggested overall. This should take fair account of constraints and opportunities such as availability of previously developed and other suitable land, existing dwelling density, flooding, green belt and conservation constraints, and access to key services such as health and education.

Other issues

14. SEERA have asked for advice on the need for transit pitches (temporary stopping places) in Oxfordshire. The Partnership was unable to assess this aspect given the complex regional movement factors involved, therefore no figures or details have been suggested at this stage.

² Oxfordshire County Council; Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire District Councils

15. Subsequent to the original briefing note, SEERA also asked for advice on the needs of travelling showpeople. There has been no assessment of travelling showpeople's accommodation needs in Oxfordshire, due to the extremely limited time afforded, therefore no advice is included. However the Partnership may commission a joint assessment later in the year, to comply with the requirements of Circular 04/2007 – Planning for Travelling Showpeople.
16. SEERA have also requested advice on implementation and delivery of sites for gypsies, travellers and travelling showpeople. It is concluded that, due to this being dependent on detailed matters such as cost, required facilities and management arrangements, the matter is best dealt with through the Local Development Framework.

Consultation

17. A stakeholder consultation was carried out in Oxfordshire regarding fair distribution of gypsy and traveller sites. Consultees included the Gypsy and Traveller communities, all parish and town councils, all registered social housing providers, Oxfordshire health trusts, the Police Authority, social services and educational services. Details were forwarded to all Area Committee chairs and party group leaders within the City Council.
18. A summary of the consultation analysis is attached as Annex A.

CONCLUSION

19. Executive Board is asked to consider whether it agrees with the view conveyed by Oxford at the Oxfordshire Partnership Member Steering Group. The view is that Oxford agrees only to accept a maximum of 2 gypsy or traveller pitches at the present time, this being a one-fifth share of the 11 pitch estimated need in Oxfordshire overall for the period 2006-2011.
20. The Steering Group has however requested that this Executive Board seriously consider supporting the approach of the other Partnership members, so that unanimous advice can be submitted to SEERA. The other Partnership members consider that the outcome of the South East Plan Partial Review would be better for Oxfordshire if a consensus were reached by all the Oxfordshire authorities. Should this be the case, Oxford would initially agree to accept 8 pitches at the present time, this being a one-fifth share of the 42 pitch estimated need in Oxfordshire overall for the period 2006-2016.

Appendices

Annex A – Stakeholder Consultation – Summary of Results

Name and contact details of author: Matthew Bates, Senior Planner, Planning Policy. Email mbates@oxford.gov.uk. Tel. 01865 252277

Background papers:

- (1) Completed SEERA Pro-forma for Advice on Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople
- (2) Preparing Regional Spatial Strategy Reviews on Gypsies and Travellers by Regional Planning Bodies. CLG, March 2007.
- (3) South East England Regional Assembly Partial Review of the South East – Provision of Caravan Sites for Gypsies and Travellers. Brief of Submission of Advice by Local Authorities. SEERA, December 2006.
- (4) Gypsy and Traveller accommodation needs assessment for the Thames Valley region, ACTVaR, September 2006.

