

LOCAL PLAN WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 12.00 noon on 24 JULY 2014

Present: Councillors S Barker, J Cheetham, E Godwin, J Ketteridge, J Menell, E Oliver, V Ranger and H Rolfe.

Also present: Councillor C Cant.

Officers in attendance: M Cox (Democratic Services Officer), H Hayden (Planning Policy Officer), S Nicholas (Senior Planning Policy Officer) and A Taylor (Assistant Director Planning and Building Control).

LP8 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Councillor Rolfe be appointed as Chairman and Councillor S Barker be appointed as Vice--Chairman of the Working Group.

LP9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Eden, Mackman, Rose and Watson. Non-committee members Councillors Dean, Redfern and Howell also sent their apologies.

LP10 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2014 were approved and signed as a correct record, subject to removing Councillor Ranger from the list of attendees, as he had arrived very late to the meeting and had not taken part in the discussion.

LP11 BUSINESS ARISING

i) Minute LP3 – summary of main issues raised by representations

It was confirmed that no date had yet been set for the Local Plan Public Inquiry. Mr Roy Foster had been appointed as the Inspector.

LP12 GYPSY AND TRAVELLER ACCOMMODATION ASSESSMENT AND ALLOCATION PROCESS

The Assistant Director Planning and Building Control presented the Essex wide Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment which had been published on 22 July 2014.

The report had been commissioned by the Essex Planning Officers Association and prepared by Opinion Research Services who were the leading expert in this area of study.

It was explained that as with the supply of housing, local authorities had a legal duty to plan for the future provision of gypsy and traveller pitches in their area. They were also required to demonstrate a 5 year land supply.

The study covered the whole of Essex including Southend, Thurrock and Basildon. The study had been prepared in line with national guidance with the objective to provide the Association with robust, defensible and up to date evidence about the accommodation needs during the period 2013 - 2033.

It was explained that in the last 35 years there had been a huge growth in the number of caravans. The target for the number of pitches was previously determined by the Rural Spatial Strategy (RSS) (at a population growth of 3% pa). The expected population and household growth could now be defined at a local level using relevant local evidence. The report concluded that within the travelling community the figure of 1.5% population growth and 2% household growth should be used.

The report explained the methodology and explained that every site in the county had been visited and a questionnaire using nationally agreed questions plus locally relevant questions had gained a 50% response rate.

The study had considered the supply of the pitches, current need and future need. The Assistant Director explained what had been included within these categories. The total requirement for Essex was 830 pitches with a supply of 43 pitches.

Under previous arrangements, the total requirement had been shared across the county. This report had considered each district independently and using the same criteria had applied the mathematical calculation. This had resulted in a wide range of pitch numbers across the county which largely reflected the history of the area and the historical locations of gypsy and traveller sites. The requirement for Uttlesford was for 26 pitches.

The working group was advised that the next stage would be for the appointed consultants to look at the capacity of the existing sites and to assess the suitability of the sites that had come forward under the call for sites. Officers and the working group would then consider the report and suggest options on how to meet the need. The recommendations would then be subject to public consultation in the autumn.

Councillor Barker had attended the meeting at Essex County Council on 21 July when the report had been presented. Some districts had been more concerned with the content of the report but the findings were broadly accepted. Uttlesford was in the lower quartile of the number of pitches to be provided. From experience she suggested that the pitches would be better accommodated on private sites rather than directly by the local authority.

It was noted that 20 of the private pitches with gypsy and traveller consent were provided on two sites in Stansted. Officers had recently become aware

that not all of these were occupied by gypsies and travellers. Action was being taken to review the site and see what action, if any, could be taken in terms of enforcement, which might provide an additional supply of pitches. This matter would be reported back to members together with the report from the consultants.

Councillor Menell was concerned that the recently issued press release had implied that the council was happy to accept the 26 pitches without discussion. The words 'not an unsurmountable challenge' were not helpful to the affected communities.

The Assistant Director replied that 26 pitches was the figure produced from the technical study but it was up to UDC to decide what to do with this number. The consultant's report would give advice but it was the council who would decide on the future action.

Councillor Oliver argued that the figures in the report did not appear to justify the proposed 40% increase over the 20 year plan period and 15% in the next 5 years. The Assistant Director said these figures were realistic and reflected the projected rate of demographic change over time in the gypsy and traveller population.

Councillor Rolfe said this had been an extensive piece of work, applied consistently across the county. There was strong evidence provided by recognised experts using robust evidence with realistic growth options. It would be unwise to challenge the process, as the only option would be to start again which might produce a less favourable result. The important part was where UDC went from here and making sure there was extensive consultation on this issue.

The Assistant Director answered a number of questions from Councillor Ranger. It was confirmed that the call for sites information had not yet been assessed. It was possible that the Local Plan process could be held up if there was no allocation made for gypsy and traveller pitches. The council would need to provide evidence to the Inspector that this matter was progressing. There was not likely to be a call for cross county border duty to cooperate but this could be an issue within the county area.

Councillor Ketteridge said he was content that the council now had a robust evidence base with which to progress this plan.

Councillor Cheetham had some concerns with some of the statements in the report, as not being realistic to the situation on the ground. She was concerned that some of the households could be double counted as some travellers had a different base for the summer and the winter months.

Councillor Cant asked about transit sites. It was explained that there were currently no operational public transit sites in the county and although not counted in the pitch numbers, these would be useful to provide a mechanism for greater enforcement against unauthorised encampments.

The working group agreed with Councillor Menell's suggestion that there should be a further press release following this meeting explaining what the council was going to do going forward.

The report was noted.

LP13

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

A further meeting would be arranged for September 2014 when the consultant's report on the site allocation was available.

The meeting ended at 1.30 pm.