

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

Members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of Unauthorised Traveller Encampments.

1.2 The Terms of Reference for the Review were:

In the light of the nuisance and expense to this Council/Kent County Council caused by unauthorised Traveller encampments;

- To examine how best to co-ordinate this Council's policies and procedures with the strategies being developed by other authorities;
- To examine how the recently proposed new government initiatives (intended to assist in resolving this problem) will impact upon Gravesham, and what opportunities/benefits they may present;
- To examine through discussions with travellers organisations/spokes persons the effect of current and proposed policies on travellers.

To make recommendations to Cabinet arising from the committee's investigations and conclusions.

1.3 Context of the review.

The context in which the review was undertaken was the 108 unauthorised encampments in North Kent between February and November 2002.

1.4 Evidence gathering.

A number of evidence gathering meetings were held in February and March 2003. A total of 10 witnesses were interviewed representing Gravesham Borough Council, Dartford Borough Council, Kent County Council, Kent County Constabulary, The Gypsy Council, Kings Farm School and Northfleet Girls School (Notes on these meetings are reproduced in Appendix 1). Members of the committee visited Hertfordshire and Norfolk County Councils to see how they managed unauthorised encampments, their provision of transit sites and other emergency stopping places.

1.5 Recommendations.

Having heard all the evidence the Overview Scrutiny Committee endorses the efforts of Officers of Gravesham Borough Council, Kent County Council and the Police authorities to provide a more co-ordinated response to unauthorised encampments within the Borough, but specifically recommends that

1.5.1. The North Kent Encampment Response Group develop and agree a communications strategy that keeps other agencies, council departments, Travellers, elected Members (both local authority and parish) and members of the public fully informed and regularly updated on the management of any unauthorised encampment using all appropriate forms of communication.

1.5.2. Statements given to the media (press, radio or television) by Gravesham Council or KCC will be with the agreement of both Authorities and inclusive of the County or Borough Councillor involved, who will be given the opportunity to quote.

1.5.3. Gravesham Council to act as an advice point for landowners within the Borough in respect of the action they can take and the scope of the laws and protocols applicable to them.

1.5.4 The Overview Scrutiny Committee, being mindful of the draft framework guide on managing unauthorised gypsy/traveller encampments issued by the ODPM and Home Office, recognises the potential benefit of transit sites/stopping places in order to alleviate the problem of unauthorised encampments;

1.5.5 This committee would welcome the introduction of new powers of eviction should the Government (in any future Criminal Justice Bill) decide that such powers were necessary.

This following recommendation was supported by a minority of the Committee:

No support is given to the provision of transit sites/stopping places in Gravesham without the prior provision of new powers of eviction which include making any breach of property rights "unlawful", and address the issue of recovering clean-up costs.

1.5.6 The Overview Scrutiny Committee would welcome a way of addressing the issue of recovery of clean-up costs.

1.5.7 If a network of transit sites/stopping places were to be established across Kent then these should be staffed and financed by Kent County Council and administration, in Gravesham, should be in close collaboration with this authority.

1.5.8 This committee would commend to Kent County Council, the Hertfordshire County Council "model" whereby the gypsy unit is self financing from the application of site fees.

1.5.9 Gravesham Borough Council will co-operate with Kent County Council in their assessment of the possible need for transit sites/stopping places across the county, which takes into account the reasons for travel in Kent, this must include local agreement to any proposals that flow from such an assessment.

The following recommendation was supported by a minority of the Committee:

Gravesham Borough Council will co-operate with Kent County Council in their current assessment of the possible need for transit sites/stopping places across the county - which will include local agreement to any proposals which flow from the assessment but will not support the implementation of such sites in Gravesham until new eviction powers are in place.

1.5.10 Gravesham Borough Council considers putting in place measures to protect vulnerable land, wherever practicable, from unauthorised encampments.