

6.3 NOTES OF GTAA STAKEHOLDERS SEMINAR

6.3.1 Introduction

6.3.2 Maidstone, Ashford, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Councils formally commissioned consultants David Coultie Associates to undertake a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA) across the four districts. Following completion of the survey, a stakeholders' seminar was held to present the findings of the study to the gypsy & traveller community and to discuss the future delivery of need identified in the draft GTAA.

6.3.3 The event was held at Lenham Community Centre on Wednesday 20th June 2007 at 10am – 12pm.

6.3.4 List of Attendees

David Coultie David Coultie Associates
Sue Whiteside Maidstone Borough Council
John Littlemore Maidstone Borough Council
Louise Lynds Maidstone Borough Council
Julie Martin Maidstone Borough Council
Hazel Skinner Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
Brian Gates Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
Tony Jarvis Ashford Borough Council
Gill Harris Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Alan Casson Kent County Council

20 MEMBERS OF THE GYPSY & TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

6.3.5 Questions and Answers

Q. The figures in the survey were challenged. Gypsies and travellers are only moving into permanent housing because of better living standards. If there were adequate sites available gypsies and travellers would prefer not to live in housing.

A. GTAA figures are a product of the results of the survey questionnaires. They are a record of fact in terms of what was said at interview by the gypsy and traveller community.

Q. The accuracy of the survey was disputed as it was believed that not all gypsies in Ashford had been interviewed.

A. Evidence suggested that 100% of caravan-based households in Ashford had been interviewed, unless there were sites that the Council was not aware of.

Q. How can decent homes be achieved? Gypsies and travellers do not want to move to housing if they can afford to buy land for their needs.

A. This issue must be addressed through the Local Development Framework (LDF) process. Good quality permanent site or pitch provision is clearly very important.

Q. Every Council has to find land suitable for the needs of the gypsy and traveller community. This is the first time in history that the community has been included in such a process. What will the Councils do next?

A. GTAAs form the evidence base for the production of Councils' LDF documents. The

findings of the survey will be used to help formulate criterion based policies in Core Strategies and to allocate land or pitches to meet the needs of the gypsy and traveller community through Development Plan Documents. GTAA's will also feed into the partial review of the South East Plan, which will include information on the number of gypsy and traveller pitches required in the region. Gypsies and travellers will be involved in the process of allocating sites through consultation and stakeholder engagement. This will take time and, meanwhile, it will be essential for each Council to monitor its pitch provision against the identified need.

Q. Some of the gypsy and traveller community cannot read or write, so how can they be included?

A. The survey is just the start of the process for meeting the needs of the gypsy and traveller community, and it sets the basis for communication with local government. Now that the scale of the problem has been identified, it is important that the dialogue between the gypsy and traveller community and planning officers continues

Q. People need educating about the needs of the gypsy and traveller community.

A. It is agreed that education is an important part of the solution, but Councils will ultimately have to come up with an answer to address the need for new sites and/or pitches.

Q. Land owned by the gypsy and traveller community has been offered to Councils in exchange for other land that is considered to be more appropriately located. Councils have stated that no new land or alternative sites are available.

A. Councils do not necessarily own land to enable them to exchange sites. However, Councils have a duty and responsibility to address identified need through their LDF documents and, if they do not, they risk their Core Strategies being found unsound.

Q. Councils are wasting money fighting planning applications. If they granted planning permissions, villages would accept the gypsies and travellers who would become part of the village community.

A. GTAA's identify the need for new permanent pitches, and Development Plan Documents will identify appropriate sites. Once suitable sites have been identified, the process should become easier to administer.

Q. The gypsy and traveller community would like to sit down and talk to the Councils about site provision, provided they would be taken seriously by Councillors and the executive.

A. Planning Officers will deal with site provision as part of the LDF process. Officers will assess sites and short-list preferred sites that Members will ultimately approve. This process will be subject to public consultation and stakeholder input but there needs to be a balanced view. The purpose of the seminar is the first step in this process, to listen to what the gypsy and traveller community has to say.

Q. The gypsies and travellers were asked about the best method to contact and involve them in the land allocation process, and to establish what sites might have development potential.

A. The community was happy to be contacted in the same way that it was for the seminar invitations.

Q. What are the timescales for addressing the results of the GTAA? Will Councils carry on evicting people in the meantime?

A. Timescales are a problem because, for example, Maidstone's Land Allocations Development Plan Document will not be adopted until 2010. Also, it will take time to complete the partial review of the South East Plan. It is therefore very important that Councils monitor new planning permissions annually and assess their supply of pitches against the need identified in the GTAA. The approach adopted towards eviction notices is a matter that will have to be discussed at Councillor-level in the light of the findings of the GTAA.

Q. Local authorities should have taken responsibility for identifying sites when the Housing Act was passed in 1994. Every Council knew this survey was happening and nothing has been done. Councils need to act now and the political will needs to change.

A. Councils did not know the quantity of need to act upon until the GTAA had been undertaken. Councils recognised the pressure for new sites but did not know the individual needs of their communities. Now the need has been identified through the survey, appropriate sites can be identified in the right places. Political will is changing.

Q. Gypsies and travellers need certainty in terms of permanent planning consents. The ability to provide homes for their children is critical as, within the next 5 years, the community's children will need somewhere to live. The four Councils involved in the survey have the opportunity to take the lead in addressing need. Gypsies and travellers who have found their own land find themselves at appeal, when in fact the Councils should have found the land for them. Why can't planning permission be granted for these sites now?

A. Planning applications for gypsy and traveller sites cannot be approved if the sites are considered to be inappropriate. Suitable land must be found to house the community and the start of that process is the stakeholders' seminar.

Q. It was suggested that a working party involving all 4 districts and the gypsy and traveller community be set up to work together to address the problems. A Kent-wide working party, facilitated by the County Council, would be helpful in moving matters forward. Working together will get things done quicker and the community wants to work with the Councils to solve the problems. How will a final solution be found?

A. Kent County Council agreed to facilitate a working party should it be found to be helpful. Maidstone Borough Council agreed to explore the need for a working party with the County and other District Councils in order to progress matters. However, each Council will be required to provide for its own need in consultation with their local communities.

Q. The gypsies and travellers explained that they did not want to live on transit sites, but preferred to be located on small permanent sites with their own families.

A. The findings of the survey reflect this viewpoint. The aim of the GTAA is to identify the need for permanent sites or pitches, and transit sites will not be included in this provision. Transit site provision is being considered through a County-wide forum.

Q. Concerns were raised that too many planning applications were being refused and in some areas the only applications granted over the past two years had been allowed at appeal. This is not good enough.

A. Planning applications must be carefully monitored to ensure that Councils are meeting the need identified in the GTAA. This monitoring process is critical in the interim period until land can be allocated through the LDF process.

6.3.6 Summary of Debate

6.3.7 The GTAA survey has identified the quantity of need required over the four districts surveyed. This is the first step in the process for allocating new sites or pitches.

6.3.8 Councils are responsible for providing for their individual gypsy and traveller accommodation needs.

6.3.9 Councils will allocate land to meet the need for new sites or pitches as part of the Local Development Framework process, identifying suitable land in consultation with the gypsy and traveller community.

6.3.10 It is critical that dialogue between the Councils and the gypsy and traveller Community is maintained during the planning process.

6.3.11 It was agreed that LDF timescales are lengthy and that the partial review of the South East Plan will also take time, so it will be essential for the process to maintain momentum if the needs of the community are to be met.

6.3.12 Kent County Council agreed to facilitate a working party to maintain momentum if a need for a forum was established. If such a need arises, Maidstone Borough Council will set up a forum.