



have
your
say...

...on changes to The Stables and Greenacres Gypsy and Traveller sites

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**Central
Bedfordshire**

Consultation on changes to The Stables and Greenacres Gypsy and Traveller sites

Central Bedfordshire Council is considering making some changes to The Stables and Greenacres Gypsy and Traveller sites.

At the moment, the council is only considering making changes, no decisions have been made yet. Before any decisions are made we want to know what local residents think about the potential change or any other suggestions for addressing the issues.

1. Background

Central Bedfordshire has 40 gypsy and traveller sites. Some are owned and managed privately and some are owned and managed by the council.

The majority of these sites, are well run and well integrated into the local community with very few issues. There are two sites, however, with several ongoing issues that need to be addressed.

The Stables and Greenacres are located in Billington, Bedfordshire. These sites are privately owned. The issues include breaches of planning permissions, absence of licensing, unsafe infrastructure (sewage, clean water to site and electricity supplies), anti-social behaviour, crime and a recent history of modern day slavery.

2. Planning enforcement issues

The council originally refused the planning application for these sites but planning permission was granted from the Planning Inspectorate on appeal in 2003.

The planning conditions that the Planning Inspector attached to the sites are not robust enough to enable the council to take enforcement action against breaches. The council cannot regulate the sites using the usual planning powers and over time this has led to several issues.

Enforcement is also complicated because it is unclear who owns the land now and there is no definitive list of who is entitled to live on the sites. Originally, the whole site was owned by one person. Since then, land and plots have been sub-divided and sold on with far less clarity around who owns plots on the sites and many of the ownership transfers have not been officially registered.

Several plots do not have the necessary planning permissions and licenses. We know there are more people living on the sites than there should be. The original permissions granted across the two sites were for 56 pitches/plots. In January 2017, there were 96 pitches/plots.

The sites are designated for gypsy and traveller residents only however we are aware that mobile homes and caravans are being rented out as affordable housing and there are now a number of people living on the site, who are not gypsy and travellers, having responded in good faith to rental adverts.

3. Infrastructure issues

In addition to these planning issues and breaches, the sites do not have the necessary infrastructure in place to support the permitted caravans/mobile homes. Over a number of years, there have been on-going issues with insufficient sewage infrastructure, inadequate supplies of clean water and electricity supplies and the additional numbers on the sites are compounding these problems.

Clearly, these issues present both a health and safety risk to residents as well as ongoing (and often expensive) action from the utility companies and other agencies.

Over a number of years, the deteriorating position on the sites has impacted not just the residents on the sites, but also the village of Billington and surrounding areas. The lack of essential infrastructure at the site has led to water supply problems for the village of Billington. This is because people on the sites have illegally tapped into the water supply, leading to water pressure problems in the village which Anglian Water has had to address. Private domestic electricity supplies have been accessed by people on the sites running up significant bills for the occupier of the private home.

The field adjacent to the sites has had ongoing issues with sewage being emptied and piped onto it. The Environment Agency has visited the sites to ensure the clean water supply is not being contaminated and continues to monitor the situation.

4. Crime and anti-social behaviour issues

Bedfordshire and Thames Valley Police forces have been able to track significant volumes of crimes to the sites and reports of anti-social behaviour continue to be a concern.

Neighbouring farms have, for many years, experienced fly-tipping and fires. This has damaged the land and farm machinery. The site has also encroached on farm land by extending plot sizes onto otherwise productive land.

There are also very serious safeguarding concerns about the sites. There have been three police operations involving arrests in relation to modern day slavery.

In 2011, 24 vulnerable people were identified as being kept on the site through coercion, intimidation and abuse. In July 2012, four members of a family living on-site were found guilty of keeping workers in a state of servitude and forcing them to perform unpaid work. Despite arrests being made, slavery continued and further operations were held in 2014 (7 people rescued) and again in 2015 with further arrests made.

Whilst the health, safety and wellbeing of those on the sites is a primary concern, we also recognise the impact on the law-abiding residents on the sites and the residents of Billington and the wider area.

Billington Parish Council has, over a period of time, consistently articulated residents' concerns about how these sites impact on their quality of life. Residents of Billington have told council officers that they are 'fearful' going about their everyday lives and the constant anti-social behaviour and criminality, including intimidation and threats, erodes their quality of life on a day-to-day basis.

The safety, health and wellbeing of all our residents is important to us and we want to find a way of addressing the ongoing and in some cases, worsening issues, on and around the site.

5. Options for change

Central Bedfordshire Council, Bedfordshire and Thames Valley Police Forces, Office of the Police Crime Commissioner and Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service have all agreed to work together to develop a long-term solution to address the issues at these sites.

The group has considered some different options.

The preferred option at the moment is for the council to buy The Stables and Greenacres sites, along with some land as close to the existing sites as possible, build a new Gypsy and Traveller site, closing the Greenacres and the Stables sites. The new site would be owned and managed by the council. It would be well run, with all of the appropriate facilities like water, sewerage and electricity and any crime and anti-social behaviour would not be tolerated.

The new site would be as close to the existing sites as possible. This proposal is not about moving the Gypsy and Travellers away from Billington.

This option is a lengthy process and there may be statutory objection and an inquiry. However, at this time, it appears to be the only option that gives the potential for a long-term solution to the core issues.

This option is estimated to cost approximately £9m (this does not include the cost of officer time across a number of organisations).

Another option considered is called "Discontinuance and Injunction". This option involves the council removing the existing planning permissions and replacing them with new planning permissions and conditions. Injunctions would then be used to remove any occupants on site who are not legally entitled to be there. The council's existing planning enforcement approach would then be used for any further breaches of conditions.

Discontinuance can be a lengthy process as there is a requirement to allow an owner/occupier to be heard at a public inquiry and it does not automatically enable the Council to remove structures already erected without the necessary planning permission however there are alternative enforcement powers that can be used to achieve this.

Non-compliance can only be managed using the current planning enforcement framework. This means enforcement can take long periods of time where no interim action is possible

and the situation is therefore likely to deteriorate. This option does not resolve the issues around landownership which will continue to make enforcement challenging.

Although this option is estimated to cost £900,000 (this does not include the cost of officer time across a number of organisations) but it does not address the problems with the lack of basic amenities, health and safety and safeguarding concerns.

For these reasons, the council and other organisations do not think this is a suitable solution.

6. Have your say

We want to know what you think of this potential change. We are also open to hearing any other ideas you may have that could address the issues.

This consultation is open from 22 August to 14 November 2017.

You can give your feedback in a number of ways; you can fill in a form on our website at www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/Billington or you can fill in the paper form and return to the address on it.

If you live on the Stables or Greenacres sites and would like to talk to us in confidence please call us on 0300 300 4355 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm. Alternatively, you can arrange a meeting with a member of staff. To arrange this please call the telephone number above or email us on Billington@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk.

7. What happens after the consultation?

The Executive at the council will review the consultation feedback and make a decision about what is going to happen at the Executive meeting on 5 December.

This meeting will be held at Priory House and is open to the public to attend. The meeting is also streamed online. You can watch the meeting at www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/webcasting.



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Contact us...

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