
Minutes of the meeting of the Essex Countywide Traveller Unit Joint Committee, held in Committee Room 1 County Hall, Chelmsford, CM1 1QH on Wednesday, 5 June 2019

Present:

Cllr Susan Barker	Essex County Council
Cllr Mark Durham	Maldon District Council
Cllr Mike Lilley	Colchester Borough Council
Cllr Aidan McGurran	Basildon Borough Council
Cllr Wendy Schmitt	Braintree District Council
Cllr Jannetta Sosin	Chelmsford City Council
Moiria Bruin	Essex Fire & Rescue Service
PC Adrian Ranson	Essex Police

Also present:

Cllr Colin Day	Uttlesford District Council
Steve Andrews	Essex County Council
Adrian Coggins	Essex County Council
Lisa Nicholls	Essex County Council
Tim Clarke	Braintree District Council
Suzanne Harris	Office of the Police Fire & Crime Commissioner
Matthew Waldie	Essex County Council

1 Welcome and election of the Chairman

The Committee Clerk welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited nominations for chairman. Cllr Barker was proposed and seconded, and, there being no other nominations, was voted unanimously as Chairman.

2 Election of Vice Chairman

The Chairman proposed Cllr Godfrey Isaacs (who was unable to attend the meeting) and this was seconded. There were no other nominations and members voted unanimously in favour of Cllr Isaacs as Vice Chairman.

3 Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

Apologies had been received from Cllr Gavin Callaghan (Basildon), substituted by Cllr Aidan McGurran, Cllr Rob Gledhill (Thurrock), Cllr Paul Honeywood (Tendring), Cllr Godfrey Isaacs (Castle Point) and Cllr Mike Webb (Rochford).

The Chairman asked each member to confirm that they had been properly appointed by their respective districts. It was noted that Cllr Day had yet to be so appointed, so it was pointed out that he was welcome to the meeting but would be unable to vote.

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 November 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5 Public speaker

The meeting was then addressed by Cllr Christian Criscione, member of Uttlesford District Council for the Ward of Flitch Green and Little Dunmow. Cllr Criscione related that, although there had been some issues in the past with sporadic burning of plastics on the permanent Travellers site, these had been dealt with satisfactorily. However, more recently the burning of tyres, toxic materials and building waste had created concerns among local residents about health issues and created feelings of antagonism toward those residents of the site. This had now escalated to a dangerous level, as there had been a number of incidents involving youths from the site, including theft, verbal abuse, antisocial behaviour and assault on local residents. The influx of transient families to the site, as opposed to the more permanent ones, has been highly disruptive to the local community.

There is a perception that nothing is being done, and Cllr Criscione had three questions for the Committee:

- Will ECTU and other stakeholders meet with Cllr Criscione and the local Parish Council to look at this situation?
- Will ECTU commit to quarterly attendance of the Flitch Green Parish Council while these circumstances are so pressing?
- Will representatives of district and county meet with Cllr Criscione to consider the relocation of the settlement to a more appropriate site?

In response, Mr Coggins confirmed that these were totally unacceptable circumstances for local residents. This was not an appropriate forum for detailed analysis of the situation, but he would certainly arrange to meet with Cllr Criscione and suitable local representatives. He had already met with representatives of Uttlesford District Council and the Police, who were all aware of these issues. He added that there was legislation that they had to work with, but suggested that the best solution would arise from everyone working together. He emphasised the need for people to produce evidence of any incidents; he appreciated concerns over personal safety but pointed out that information could be given anonymously through Crimestoppers. This was confirmed by PC Ranson, who added that logging an incident built up a picture of the overall situation, indicating the level of seriousness; and it was suggested that logging an incident via the website could also be an effective approach.

6 Finance update

The Committee received a financial report from Lisa Nicholls, Finance Business Partner, ECC.

1. **2018/19 outturn position.** Members noted a £53,428 surplus on net expenditure to 31 March 2019, mostly due to an underspend on supplies and services, resulting from a reduced number of unauthorised encampments through the year. This had increased the surplus to £78,355 at closure of the 2018/19 accounts.
2. **Budget for 2019/2020 and future years.** The budgeted surplus for 2019/20 was £13,925, and this would decrease to £10,773 in 2020/21 and £7,539 in 2021/22, at present membership rates.
3. **Membership fees.** To maintain a higher level, a rise in membership fees was proposed. Members considered three options – 1% (actual increase £81), 2% (£163) or 3.1% (£253).

Option 2, the preferred option, was proposed, seconded and agreed in principle by Members. It was noted that this increase would need to be taken back to each member's respective authority; so it was agreed that the clerk should write to each authority, after the meeting, seeking ratification of the increase.

4. **Balance Sheet – Reserves.** The potential impact of an agreed 2% increase in fees for 2020/21 on the reserves figures was noted – raising the surplus from £78,355 for 2018/19, to £92,281 (2019/20) to £103,054 (2020/21).
5. **Reasons for maintaining a reserve.** Members noted that the reserve was not yet at the level of three months operating costs (£95,000), which was at risk of being wiped out, depending on levels of activity.

7 **Membership status**

Mr Andrews reported no change in the membership of the Joint Committee, with all but three authorities (Epping Forest, Harlow and Southend) signed up. He added that current members had been asked to renew the agreement recently and their responses were expected shortly. No change was expected.

8 **High level risk assessment**

Mr Andrews worked through the 5 risk categories, pointing out that he intended to downgrade the second one, relating to insufficient funding, as the funding situation was now more secure. The Chairman confirmed that she intended to review these with Mr Andrews, particularly in respect of recruitment. She invited any member with a view to contact Mr Andrews directly.

Cllr McGurran joined the meeting at this point.

9 **Operations performance update - key issues**

The Committee received an update from Mr Andrews, as per the circulated report.

Fire safety:

- The winter campaigns relating to Christmas and fireworks have been repeated
- A different approach is being taken going forwards with Fire Safety visits: in addition to delivering ad hoc visits, we will be targeting specific geographic areas with multiple officers
- Funding is being sought for the return of the SOS bus to the Oak Lane/Basildon sites, which will facilitate more health, education and fire safety works on sites
- The Fire Safety performance figures were noted.

Public Health:

- Work continues in the normal areas, but certain areas have been specifically targeted – diabetes awareness, sugar swap, health checks, GP registration, Dial 111 and cervical smear screening
- In response to a question, Mr Andrews confirmed that he has not been aware of deafness as an issue with the Traveller community, but he appreciated its potential impact and would give it further consideration
- Mental health is a new area for the unit. It has been a taboo subject in the community, but we are starting to engage with parents and then young people about mental health issues
- Noted was an example of how leaflets were adapted to make them more accessible to the Traveller community
- Health and Fire Safety Days are being planned for a number of sites through June and July, as usual.

Education:

- Work continues on facilitating access for children to education, from pre-school to apprenticeships and vocational training. Non-attendance is a particularly challenging area, and changes to the school transport policy have had an impact on the travelling community.

Unauthorised encampments

- There was an early drop-off at the end of the 2018 summer season. Figures are now picking up but are still lower than in previous years. There are 71 encampments for the reporting period, but this represented a five year low.
- Mr Andrews agreed to keep members updated on the situation by district, by circulating monthly figures to all members
- Members noted the statistics. There has been an increase in incursions onto private land. Removing these could be easier for private landowners, using bailiffs under common law, which is not a route available to local authorities. Mr Andrews confirmed that the

Unit's activities did cover land owned by parishes within member districts

- Mr Andrews informed members that the efficiency of district officers in clearing up sites post encampments, means that we cannot always record the condition of a site once a group has departed. We are requesting that they take photographic evidence of the site condition before clear up, so we can take that into consideration for future encampments.
- Horses. The Unit often receives calls with concerns reference horses around encampments and sites, but they lie outside the Unit's remit.
- It also receives calls on unauthorised developments often forwarded by partner areas, but such issues should stay with the partner areas with their planning departments
- Homelessness. There has been an increase in cases of non-Traveller incursions, eg homeless people in tents. Again, this is not a matter for the Unit – it is up to the landowner to take action alongside any homeless provision/services. Discussions are taking place with homelessness and housing officers about this, with a view to developing the interface between them and the Unit
- Injunctions. Members were updated on relevant injunctions, both within Essex and further afield. The reduced injunction granted to Bromley by Bow was particularly noted – Mr Andrews pointed out that views were divided on the significance of this decision and where it might lead. It was also noted that injunctions merely displaced travelling groups, but provided no long-term solution
- Regarding the efforts of an Essex MP (Mark Francois) to change the status of trespass to a criminal activity, Mr Andrews pointed out that it is included as an option for further consideration following central government's consultation on UE's, and that criminalising trespass would impact on all trespass and not just Traveller encampments.

Training

- County Councillors had received a training session on Travellers and it had proved a lively, useful session. The Chairman pointed out that any partner members wishing to receive a similar session should contact the Unit.

The Chairman thanked Mr Andrews for his presentation and asked that the Committee's thanks should be passed on to his staff for all the hard work they did on the ground.

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ECC/ECTU Review

Mr Coggins provided an update. Essex County Council has been looking at its strategic purposes and corporate objectives and this has included its role with regards to the Gypsy and Traveller agenda, also taken in the context of other relevant stakeholders.

There are two particular aspects of the Unit's work.

The first concerns one of the key objectives of the County Council - improving outcomes for its residents. There are at least 2600 Gypsy/Travellers living in Essex and ECTU seeks to improve their outcomes, in health and other matters. There are other agencies who can also contribute to this – NHS England for example – and talks are ongoing with these to include them in this process. Education is another area where the travelling community compares badly with other groups, and discussions have been held with other parts of the County Council, to see how matters may be improved. ECTU is well placed to co-ordinate the processes and has a small but very experienced team in place.

The second aspect concerns unauthorised encampments. ECTU was set up to improve communication across the agencies and to ensure consistency in approach across the county; to dismantle this would be unwise and there is no intention to do so.

So, the recommendation is that the Unit continues.

Transit Sites. Members were reminded that, under current legislation, the existence of a transit site gave the police additional powers to move on travellers from an unauthorised encampments. It was noted that the use of such sites does raise several issues and that some considerable resource had been used up over the years, seeking a suitable site, but without result. Following the Government's recent consultation on the issue of travellers, it is likely that new legislation will be introduced, so it is considered wise to do nothing relating to transit sites for the time being, until the consequences of any new legislation are made clear.

The Chairman asked that a copy of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Community in Essex Health Needs Assessment 2018 be circulated to all partner members.

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Date of next meeting

The next meeting will take place at 10.00am on Wednesday 13 November 2019, at County Hall, Chelmsford.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 11.16 am

Chairman