

Decision No: 12/01957

From: Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member – Environment, Highways & Waste
Paul Crick, Director, Planning and Environment

To: Environment, Highways & Waste Cabinet Committee

Date: 20 September 2012

Subject: Pitch Fee for New Coldharbour Lane Gypsy & Traveller Site

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This report details the reasons for the proposed pitch fee for the new Coldharbour site, and necessary compliance with the Mobile Homes Act, for current and future pitch occupiers. It includes the reason for, and proposed level of, a service charge towards costs of waste water disposal.

Recommendations:

The report recommends a pitch fee of £65 per week, to take effect from the handover of each new pitch on the new site, or 1 April 2013 if later, for existing pitch occupiers, subject to consultation under the Mobile Homes Act 1983. It is a Cabinet Member decision.

1. Introduction

The Coldharbour Lane site in Aylesford was originally established in 1981, to accommodate families who had lived for some time down the adjacent (then) A20. It was a 22-pitch site, with most of the pitches only allowed to have one caravan on them.

Following various efforts down the years to improve and expand the site, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and the County Councils started a joint project in 2008 to establish a new site, which has included new land acquisition and planning consent for a 26-pitch site, and part of the funding from the Homes and Communities Agency.

That new site is now being constructed, and should be available for occupation early next year.

As a new site, there needs to be a pitch fee agreed for those who will be allocated a new pitch on the site, and an increase in pitch fee for those who live on the old site currently.

2. Financial Implications

The proposed £65 per week per pitch fee will cover the costs of maintenance of the site and repayment of a significant proportion of the prudential borrowing needed to build the site. This financial model for the construction is one commonly used for social housing, but very rare, possibly unique, for Traveller sites.

The implications to KCC if the pitch fee were not agreed and collected would be serious, as any shortfall would need to be found from the County Council's revenue budget.

3. Bold Steps for Kent and Policy Framework

(1) The new site is primarily designed to tackle disadvantage, one of the key strands of Bold Steps for Kent.

4. The Report

The Mobile Homes Act 1983, in a slightly amended form, has applied to all Traveller sites managed by councils since 30 April 2011.

It requires site operators to consult over pitch fee increases with existing pitch occupiers, and to justify the proposed pitch fee set for new pitch occupiers.

Consultation over the design of the new site has taken place with current occupiers, and they will be consulted over the proposed increase to their pitch fee.

The new site is a complete transformation of the current site, on which the pitch fee has been £44.50 per week.

The current pitch fees for sites managed by the Gypsy and Traveller Unit range between £44.50 and £57, so Coldharbour Lane, because of its current condition, is the lowest.

The new site has larger pitches than the current site, and the new facilities include new amenity blocks, which are fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act, all new pitch surfacing, new fencing and new utilities. In particular, the drainage arrangements for the site are being completely replaced. The new site, unlike the current site, has a play area for children.

While it is difficult to find a new Traveller site nearby to reference for pitch fee levels, the Edenbridge site in Sevenoaks has recently had significant improvements and expansion and its pitch fee is currently £72.10 per week.

Based on the extent of the improvements resulting from the new site development, the recommended pitch fee for new pitch occupiers is £65 per week per pitch, and the recommended increase for current pitch occupiers is from £44.50 to £65.

It is usually only possible to raise a pitch fee when twelve months has elapsed since the last rise.

Unless there is a way of proposing and implementing an increase within that year period, it is recommended that the increase for existing occupiers takes effect from 1 April 2013.

5. Conclusions

It is clearly vital that an appropriate new pitch fee is set for the Coldharbour Lane site. The requirements of the Mobile Homes Act mean that it needs to be justified, especially the increase for current pitch occupiers.

The current pitch fees for sites managed by the Gypsy and Traveller Unit range between £44.50 and £57, so Coldharbour Lane, because of its current condition, is the lowest.

The new site is not just a refurbishment or major improvement, but a complete redevelopment and expansion and has a greater amenity offer for residents.

Because of the increased pitch size, new “plot for life” blocks which comply with the Disability Discrimination Act, and new features like the play area, the proposed pitch fee of £65 is justified, and compares favourably with the pitch fee of £72.10 on the only other extensively improved site in Kent, at Edenbridge in Sevenoaks District.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that

1. A pitch fee of £65 per week is set for the new Coldharbour Lane Gypsy and Traveller site

7. Background Documents

(1) Communities and Local Government Guide to the Mobile Homes Act:
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/2072956.pdf>

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