
TORLOCHAN TRAVELLING PERSON SITE, BY SANDBANK

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Argyll Community Housing Association has owned and managed the three official Travelling Person sites within Argyll and Bute since these were transferred by the council along with its housing stock in 2006. In January 2017 the association's board considered a proposal to close the site at Torlochan, by Sandbank, as this was deemed to be no longer economically viable due to perceived lack of demand.
- 1.2 Under the 2001 Housing (Scotland) Act and subsequent legislation and guidance, the local authority has a duty to assess the accommodation and support needs of Gypsy/Travellers and to ensure that these are met via the Local Housing Strategy. Therefore, the council retains an interest in the sites and is required to take a view on ACHA's proposals. This report sets out the context and issues relating to ACHA's proposal and notes potential strategic and financial implications for the council.
- 1.3 While it is the view of officers that there is currently no identified need from this client group, there would be potential financial implications for the council if evidence of unmet demand in the Cowal area were to be confirmed at some point in the future.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Area Committee note the content of this report and agree in principle to support the mothballing of Torlochan site, subject to any future evidence of unmet need in the area.

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3.0 INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 Argyll Community Housing Association's Board of Management determined in January 2017 that Torlochan Gypsy/Traveller site is no longer economically viable due to lack of demand. They have therefore proposed to close the site and consider with local community groups potential alternative uses. ACHA has further agreed that if no other suitable community use can be identified the site should be closed as an official Gypsy/Traveller site and mothballed pending future potential development opportunities.
- 3.2 Argyll and Bute Council and the Scottish Government retain a statutory strategic and financial interest in the official sites and are required to take a formal view on ACHA's proposals. While closure of the site at Torlochan could have potential implications for the council in the future, analysis of the available data suggests that ACHA is correct in assuming minimal or nil demand currently for this site.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 It is recommended that the Area Committee note the content of this report and agree in principle to support the mothballing of Torlochan site, subject to any future evidence of unmet need in the area.

5.0 DETAIL

- 5.1 ACHA reports that Torlochan Gypsy/Traveller Site has remained unoccupied over the last two years and demand has been low to nil. While this is true, it is also worth noting that the site was effectively inaccessible over this period and, therefore, potential occupants may have been unwittingly deterred from seeking a pitch on the site.
- 5.2 Nevertheless, the Council's current Housing Need and Demand Assessment does support the view that there is no evidence of unmet need for such provision in the Cowal area; and across the local authority area as a whole the recent trends suggest that demand is declining rather than increasing. Overall occupancy rates of the official sites in Argyll and Bute has fluctuated but over the last five years the rates declined from 83% to 73%, and there is currently no one registered on the HOMEArgyll waiting list for a pitch in the area.

Argyll & Bute Gypsy / Traveller sites			
Year	Total pitches	Pitches Occupied	Occupancy Rate
Mar - 2012	30	25	83.3%
Mar - 2013	30	24	80.0%
Mar - 2014	30	18	60.0%
Mar - 2015	22	17	77.3%
Mar - 2016	22	14	63.6%
Mar - 2017	22	16	72.7%

Source: Argyll & Bute Gypsy/Traveller Twice Yearly Count

- 5.3 As of March 2017, there were 7 families (21 persons) resident at the Ledaig site, near Oban, and 8 families (26 persons) at the Dunchologan site, outside Lochgilphead. On average there were around 2 or 3 applicants during the year and no one has been turned away during that period. A number of Gypsy/ Travellers in recent years have expressed a preference for settled accommodation in local communities. In 2013 there were 9 households on the waiting list defining themselves as Gypsy/Travellers; and in 2014 this dropped to 7, while in 2015 there were only 3 applicants in this category (0.1% of the waiting list). This suggests a decline in the demand from this group for mainstream accommodation as well as for official pitches for caravans and mobile homes.
- 5.4 Given the consequent rent loss to ACHA from the vacant site (estimated at over £33,482 for the last two years), and the ongoing cost of maintenance, combined with the additional costs associated with upgrading sites to meet the new site standards introduced by the Scottish Government in 2016, the association has determined that keeping Torlochan open would prove economically unviable. It should be noted that sale of the site is not deemed financially feasible by ACHA, due to the conditions of the stock transfer “clawback” agreement with the Scottish Government who originally funded the acquisition and development of the site from the public purse.
- 5.5 It should also be noted that the council currently contributes an annual grant of £38,659 from its Strategic Housing Fund to ACHA for the purpose of site maintenance and upkeep. If Torlochan were to close, Council Housing Services would anticipate negotiating a proportionate reduction in the grant.
- 5.6 In September/October 2016 ACHA carried out a consultation exercise on their proposals for Torlochan which provided opportunities for residents of the other local sites, local Members, the local community council, and other local authorities with TP sites to express their views. The association initially received 32 responses within the consultation period, however a further 20 responses were submitted after that period, marked from residents of Duncholgan site outside Lochgilphead. Of the total combined responses, 17 were in support of closure, 2 were undecided, and 33 were against, albeit the majority of those against (20) comprised the late submissions from Dunchologan. It is unclear if the strongly

expressed opposition from the Dunchologan respondents reflected an actual need or intention to use the Torlochan site or was just a statement of principle.

- 5.7 Council Housing Services have sought further information from relevant services (such as Roads, Environmental Health) as well as Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park in order to assess whether there has been any notable increase in the incidence of unauthorized camping around Cowal or Lomond which might be attributable to Torlochan site being inaccessible over recent years. Evidence is generally patchy and anecdotal, but there is no indication that patterns of unauthorized camping have been affected either way by the status of the official site.

6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 As the strategic housing authority for the area, the council has a statutory duty to ensure that the accommodation and support needs of Gypsy/Travellers are addressed. The closure of Torlochan site could have resource implications for the council in the future, however current analysis indicates that there is minimal or nil demand for the site. On that basis, it is recommended that ACHA's proposal to mothball the site is supported; subject to reviewing the status of the site should any demand from Travellers emerge in the future

7.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Policy - The Local Housing Strategy requires adequate provision of accessible sites to meet the needs of the Gypsy/Traveller community. Current analysis indicates that this objective would be satisfied even if the Torlochan site were closed.
- 6.2 Financial – There could be potential financial implications for the council if a new site in Cowal had to be recommissioned or developed to address any emerging need in the future.
- 6.3 Legal – The Council has a legal duty to assess the needs of Gypsy/Travellers and to ensure these are met. However, both the council and ACHA also have a duty to maximize public sector assets effectively.
- 6.4 HR - None
- 6.5 Equalities – Closure of the site will clearly reduce the facilities available for this specific minority group. The Gypsy/Traveller community retain a high profile on the national political agenda; and a significant proportion of those consulted were strongly opposed to this proposal.
- 6.6 Risk – Given the current trends and short term projections of need and demand, the adverse risk to the Council is likely to be low.

6.7 Customer Service – None.

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