
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 In September 2017 the Bute and Cowal Area Committee agreed to encourage ACHA to engage with local community groups to identify a community use for the Torlochan site, and if no such suitable use could be found, agree in principal to support the mothballing of the Torlochan site, subject to any future evidence of unmet need in the area.
- 1.4 It is the view of officers that there is currently no identified unmet need from the Gypsy/Traveller community, and that any future need could be met by provision of pitches at the other 2 sites within Argyll and Bute, Dunchologan and Ledaig.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Area Committee agree to ACHA's proposals to take forward discussions with community groups with a view to signing a lease for Torlochan to be used by the community for an appropriate purpose.

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3.0 INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 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.
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4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 It is recommended that the Area Committee agree to ACHA's proposals to take forward discussions with community groups with a view to signing a lease for Torlochan to be used by the community for an appropriate purpose.

5.0 DETAIL

- 5.1 ACHA reports that Torlochan Gypsy/Traveller Site has remained unoccupied

over the last three years and demand has been low to nil.

- 5.2 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%
Mar - 2018	22	16	72.7%

Source: Argyll & Bute Gypsy/Traveller Twice Yearly Count

- 5.3 As of March 2018, there were 6 families (10 persons) resident at the Ledaig site, near Oban, and 10 families (35 persons) at the Dunchologan site, outside Lochgilphead. 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). In 2018 there were 18 applicants who defined themselves as Gypsy/Travellers but only 3 were looking for pitches. The 3 applicants looking for pitches were based in Dumbarton, Lochgilphead and Glenrothes. There were 2 applicants provided with pitches during the year (April 2017 – March 2018) and no one was turned away during that period.
- 5.4 Given the consequent rent loss to ACHA from the vacant site 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 the Strategic Housing Fund to ACHA for the purpose of site maintenance and upkeep. A payment of £41 288 was made to ACHA in March 2018. If Torlochan were to close, Council Housing Services will negotiate a proportionate reduction

in the grant in line with the Stock Transfer agreement. Council legal services have agreed that a reduction of one third would be appropriate as one of the three sites in Argyll will no longer be available to the Gypsy/Traveller community.

- 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 Duncholgan. It is unclear if the strongly expressed opposition from the Duncholgan 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. Recent discussions with Gypsy/Travellers at an illegal encampment in Helensburgh and Lomond suggested that people who arrive in Argyll set up camp for a short while and move on. The majority of the families have accommodation elsewhere and have no interest in renting a pitch on an official site such as Torlochan.
- 5.8 Argyll and Bute Council can discharge statutory obligations to the Gypsy/Travellers by offering pitches at the remaining 2 site in the local authority area, Duncholgan(Mid Argyll) and Ledaig(Lorn). These sites have operated with 6 pitch vacancies on average over the last 4 years. If there was a significant increase in demand there is the potential to increase the number of pitches at the Duncholgan site where the Council own land adjoining the current 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. Analysis over the last year suggests that there is no unmet need or demand in the Argyll and Bute area for pitches and that there is capacity within the provision of 22 pitches over 2 sites to meet an increased need and demand in the future.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 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.
- 7.2 Financial – There could be potential financial implications for the council To provide site provision to address any emerging need in the future.
- 7.3 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.
- 7.4 HR - None
- 7.5 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.
- 7.6 Risk – Given the current trends and short term projections of need and demand, the adverse risk to the Council is likely to be low.
- 7.7 Customer Service – None.

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