

 <b>Brent</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Housing Scrutiny Committee</b> 14 September 2017</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Report from Operational Director Housing</b></p>
Wards Affected: Stonebridge	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Management of Lynton Close Travellers site</b></p>	

## **1.0 Background**

- 1.1 Lynton Close houses a community of settled families from the Irish Traveller community, who rent pitches from Brent Council, on which they live in permanent mobile homes. The site has 31 pitches, and is managed through a contract between Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) on behalf of Brent Council. A satellite photo and map showing land ownership is included within Appendix A.
- 1.2 Historically there has not been always been a positive relationship between the community and the Council / BHP. In early 2017, discussions began with key strategic partners, such as the Police and Fire Brigade, about what could be done to improve this relationship in order to both manage the site more proactively, and improve outcomes for residents. The key concerns at this time were;
  - Financial inclusion,
  - Overcrowding,
  - Fire Safety, and
  - Anti-social behaviour.
- 1.4 This report sets out the progress that has been made against the four key areas of concern, and the next steps where these have already been set out. However, all of these concerns are interlinked, and it is important to note that the Council has worked with BHP and OCC to make additional efforts to engage with residents to address all of these concerns by mutual agreement.
- 1.5 In addition, the answers to the questions raised by the Scrutiny Committee, who visited the site on 4 August 2017, are itemised in Appendix B.

## 2.0 Financial Inclusion

- 2.1 Rent levels at Lynton Close have been reduced by 1% per year in line with legislative requirements, but from a very high baseline. The pitch rent for 2017/18 is currently £240.20. In addition to the pitch rent, set by Brent Council, residents rent their mobile homes from a private provider - Jenkins. The mobile home provider is permitted under legislation to charge up to the value as the rental charge. In practice, they levy the maximum amount allowable, effectively doubling the cost to the resident to £480.40 per week.
- 2.2 Implementation of the benefit cap has meant some residents do not receive full Housing Benefit to cover this cost, and are not in a position to pay the shortfall. In addition to this, many households are comprised of more than one generation, meaning that adult children within the household cause a non-dependent deduction to be made to HB, further affecting affordability. Compounding this, where a benefit claim is suspended, residents face a range of barriers to getting benefits back into payment, including the historic mistrust of the Council, and often a lack of understanding of benefit entitlement.
- 2.3 Rent arrears have gradually built up over a number of years, with a small handful of pitches in arrears of over £10,000. The total arrears figure for the site is £238,000. The Council could consider taking enforcement action, but the preference is to try to work with families to maximise their income by making appropriate benefit claims; as such, significant efforts have been made to engage positively with residents in order to maximise their income. Financial Inclusion Officers and OCC staff have worked with residents to resolve problems with their benefits, make backdated claims for HB, and ensure that adults who are also part of the household make appropriate applications for their own benefits to prevent non-dependent deductions being applied. This has thus far resulted in a reduction in resident debt of over £20,000.
- 2.4 Pitch rents also need to be reviewed in order to make them more affordable, and more comparable with other social housing rental charges. As a comparison, the Local Housing Allowance rate for a three bedroom property in this area of the borough is £303 per week, significant lower than the pitch and mobile home rental costs incurred by residents of Lynton Close.
- 2.5 A report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2016 found that pitch charges ranged from £119.22 to £205.84 per week. This was based on data obtained from 71 councils. The Council has tried to do a benchmarking exercise to establish pitch rents charged in other London Boroughs, but only three submissions were received, and the charges are extremely varied:

Borough	Pitch rent 2017/18
Brent	£240.20
Southwark	£206.23
Lambeth	£45.87

Barking & Dagenham	£133.90 (average)
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2.6 The Council is currently looking at proposals to reduce the weekly rent, which would in turn oblige the Mobile Home provider to reduce their rental charges. For example, if the Council reduced the weekly rent to £143.95, then the maximum charge per pitch would be £287.90. This figure is below the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) cap, which would mean that where a resident is eligible for full HB, this would generally be sufficient to cover the full cost of the pitch and mobile home rental.

2.7 Further work is required to ensure the financial implications of any proposal are fully understood. The current rental income generated by the site each year is £391,120, and expenditure is £383,957 and can be broken down as follows:

<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>Annual cost (£)</b>
Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) Management Fee	231,228
BHP Management fee	42,458
Bad Debt Provision	88,294
Repairs	21,977
<b>Total Cost</b>	<b>383,957</b>

2.8 As is clear from the table, the greatest single cost is the OCC management fee which includes all activity to manage the site and engage with residents, providing particular expertise required. This contract was subject to a competitive tendering exercise in 2016, but this procurement process did not generate any savings. What is not immediately obvious from the table is the underinvestment in the accommodation on the site.

2.9 As soon as this work is completed, the proposals will need to go to Cabinet as they will require its approval. It is anticipated that these changes will be implemented by April 2018 at the latest.

### 3.0 Overcrowding

3.1 Over the years since the site was first occupied, families have grown, and many have installed additional trailers to provide additional space for the next generation. Recently, three families left the site and their pitches have been allocated to overcrowded families already living on the site, which has eased the situation, but there is agreement that the site is overcrowded and this is causing problems. However, there is still more work to do to fully understand the extent of the overcrowding and the solutions to it, which could include supporting people to move elsewhere as well as identifying additional site space.

3.2 There is work ongoing between the families, OCC, BHP and Housing Needs to get a detailed and agreed version of who is living there at the moment and the level of overcrowding this creates. This will give the Council a better understanding of how it relates to statutory definitions of overcrowding, and

therefore, the support that is already on offer, and whether or not our current allocations policy needs revision to support move on.

- 3.3 As part of this work, a dedicated Housing Officer has been assigned to work with the families at Lynton Close. This responds to an issue raised by Lynton close residents (when they have approached Housing Needs in the past, they have had to speak to different officers, who they do not feel they have fully understood their situation) and it ensures the Council has a dedicated officer who can work with individual families who have already expressed an interest in moving from the site into settled accommodation, and that this officer can work with senior managers to unpick the potential issues about the current offer and how this may need to improve.
- 3.4 As it currently stands, working with this dedicated officer there are two routes to moving from Lynton Close through:
- the Housing Needs preventative service (Find Your Home). However, we know that some families at Lynton Close have expressed concern about PRS landlords and a belief that they will evict traveller families. This needs to be tested working with OCC and the dedicated Housing Officer. If the issue is prejudice (rather than the desire for a secure tenancy), it should be possible to solve, as Housing Needs have experience of working with other groups where there is perceived prejudice, and this can be managed with the right support, or
  - the statutory housing service as a result of meeting statutory overcrowding thresholds. In these cases, the council would have to provide accommodation although it would not make Social Housing any more likely as in most cases our statutory duty is discharged through PRS properties at the moment.
- 3.5 As a result of this work, we will be clear whether the allocation policy needs revising or not - whether the issues that we need to deal with are about practice, expertise and resourcing, or whether we need to make changes as part of a wider revision of the allocations policy. The deadline for being able to make this decision is December 2017. And as a result of this we will be clear about the overall demand for the site and whether we need to look for additional site space.
- 3.6 In addition to this work on overcrowding, work has already begun on ensuring the current pitches are at an appropriate standard. A site visit was carried out by the Operational Director Housing (and other BHP officers) on 23 August 2017 ahead of some minor remedial works that were planned. What became apparent in that visit was that the planned remedial works were insufficient, and therefore work is in progress to specify a wider set of works to bring the pitches up to the appropriate standard.

#### **4. Fire Safety**

- 4.1 In line with BHP's wider fire safety policy, Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs) are carried out annually for high risk properties, which includes high rise tower

blocks and sites like Lynton Close. All FRAs are carried out by our specialist fire safety contractor, Bailey Garner. A copy of the most recent FRA is attached at Appendix C.

- 4.2 Two recommendations relate to keeping the access road free from obstruction, 1 relates to abandoned vehicles and 1 relates storage of cylinders on site. These issues have all been raised with residents by the site manager and are monitored regularly. The recommendation about maintaining a 6m spatial gap between mobile homes relate to the overcrowding issue described in 3 above.
- 4.3 The concern raised by the FRA about potentially difficult access within the site for emergency vehicles relates to the fact that Lynton Close itself, within the site boundary, is considered to be the escape route. However, vehicles regularly park on both sides of the road, which could restrict emergency access. We have already carried out a number of enforcement “blitzes” to try to deal with abandoned or inappropriately parked vehicles, and continue to have discussions with colleagues in Highways to address this.
- 4.4 In addition to this, as noted above, a lack of adequate socket provision in the kitchen facilities promotes overloading of sockets which also poses a fire risk. This will be a key focus of the proposed improvement works highlighted in section 3.
- 4.5 Carbon Monoxide, smoke alarms and heat detectors are installed in all mobile homes as well as utility blocks (kitchen and bathroom areas), and the Council, and BHP maintain a close relationship with the Fire Brigade who make regular visits to the site. The last visit was on 25 July 2017 when the London Fire Brigade held a fire safety meeting with residents of Lynton Close to advise on the issues created by overcrowding.

## **5. Anti-Social Behaviour**

- 5.1 A range of issues have been reported to the Harlesden Local Joint Action Group and Lynton Close Focus Group in the last 12 months, including:
  - Concerns had been raised in relation to an open back tipper which been left on the public highway, the vehicle in question has a considerable amount of waste / rubbish in it. The Council's Environmental enforcement team are dealing with this
  - Issues had arisen about youths from Lynton Close throwing stones at passing vehicles – in response BHP sent out a letter to all households reminding them of their tenancy agreement. Craig (OCC Site Manager) also spoke with a number of youths directly about this issue
  - There had been a Police response from Territorial Support Group (Non Brent Police) in relation to a prison escapee who was on site
  - Reports of youths from Lynton Close gaining access to a communal block on Yeats Close which is managed by Metropolitan Housing Trust (MHT).

Residents felt intimidated by this. MHT wrote to their residents reminding them to not allow access to people who do not live there

- Ongoing issues relating to the parking at Lynton Close opposite Selco including illegal waste carriers parked on the pavement outside Lynton Close, and reported thefts. The police have been involved in all of these incidents, but in order to effect long-term change, there remains a need to demonstrate a zero-tolerance approach by taking enforcement action to its conclusion. One barrier to doing this consistently in the locality is private land ownership, and we will work with Metropolitan Housing Trust to seek a resolution to this.

5.2 Common to all of the issues raised through this paper, the key to making progress is re-building the trust between the public services and the Irish Traveller Community on Lynton Close as the foundation for further work which may need to include use of wider enforcement powers.

## **Background Papers**

Appendix A – Site Maps

Appendix B - Answers to questions raised by Scrutiny Committee.

Appendix C – Fire Risk Assessment for Lynton Close

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